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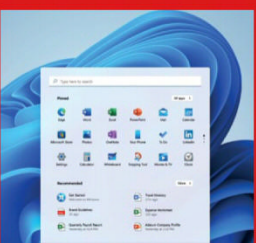
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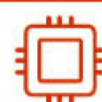
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“WITHIN AN EPISODE IT'D BECOME MY NEW FAVOURITE SHOW”



When I started watching Riot's TV show *Arcane*, I was hopeful but definitely a little skeptical. Videogame adaptations are always rubbish, right? Within an episode it'd become my new favourite show, a thrilling and gorgeous adventure that I'm now desperate to see the concluding act of.

It's emblematic of where Riot

ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter**

@robinlvalentine

This month

Actually cheered at a fictional character putting on some metal gloves.

is at as a company – full of truly wild ambitions and, thanks to its sheer passion and seemingly limitless resources, actually achieving them. Across our enormous feature, we've tried to capture that spirit – and get a taste of what's coming next...

ROBIN VALENTINE**PRINT EDITOR**robin.valentine@futurenet.com**SUBSCRIBE TO****PC GAMER**Check out our
latest offer!**SEE p54**

The PC Gamer team

**STEVEN MESSNER****Twitter**

@stevenmessner

This month

Fathered both our cover feature and an actual child. I think we both know which he's more proud of.

**CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON****Twitter**

@screencuisine

This month

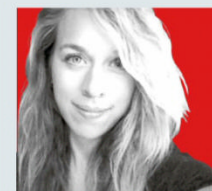
Explored a sinking relic. No, not PC Gamer magazine – the Titanic.

**RACHEL WATTS****Twitter**

@rachel_watts

This month

Left the site team to join Play magazine. Now there's no one left to keep PCG wholesome.

**LAUREN MORTON****Twitter**

@ComradeCupcake_

This month

Joined our US team! She didn't actually write anything this issue, but here's her photo anyway.

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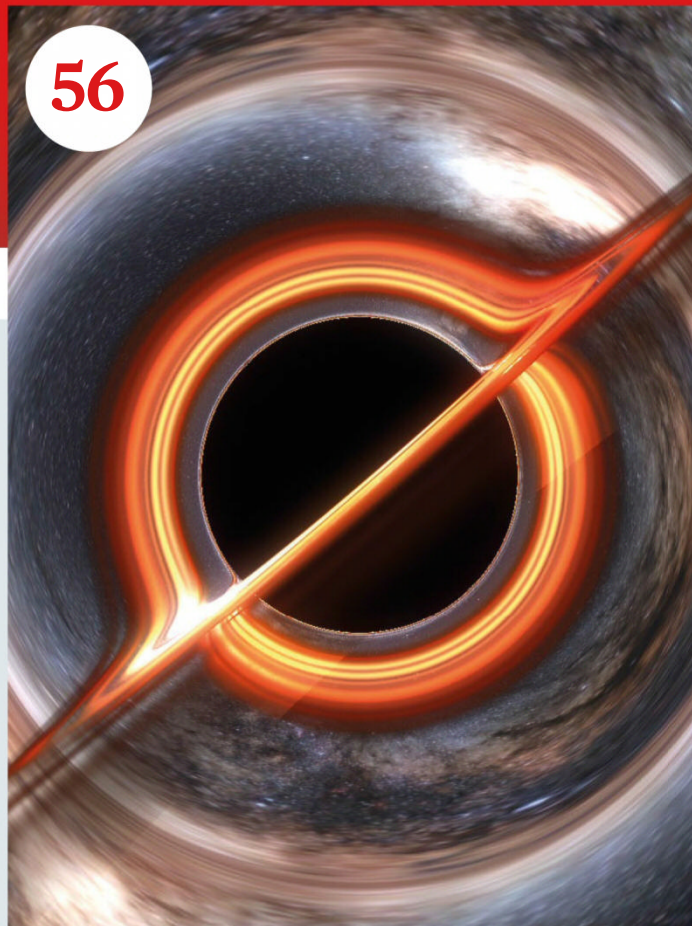
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



TWITCH REFLEX

125GB of data from the streaming giant **TWITCH** was leaked. What's next?

On October 6, 2021 a 125GB torrent appeared online, accompanied by a screed about Twitch, claiming to include the site's source code, unannounced projects, and streamer earnings. The next day Twitch confirmed the breach was real. "It will send a shudder down [the spine of] any hardened infosec professional," said ThreatModeler CEO Archie Agarwal. "This is as bad as it could possibly be."

As Twitch grappled with the fallout, more information came to light: the company claimed user passwords

and financial information outside of the streamer payouts were not exposed. It also confirmed that the incident was the result of a server configuration error "that allowed improper access by an unauthorised third party". The issue is now fixed.

Notably, Twitch's statements continue to include wiggle-room,

**"THE NEWS COULD
HARDLY HAVE COME
AT A WORSE TIME
FOR TWITCH"**

such as saying the above came from an examination of "information included in the files exposed". This is because the hackers behind the attack referred to the leak as "part one", implying that there's more to come in the future.

LEAK POINT

The news could hardly have come at a worse time for Twitch, after a year in which it's struggled to deal with the new phenomenon of hate raids and faced the #dayoffTwitch protests from streamers unhappy with the platform's reaction to this and other issues. Nevertheless, what at first looked like a potentially catastrophic

TALL TALES

FABLE FAIL



We heard little regarding the *Fable* revival since its announcement last year, but in October the Xbox Games Studios Twitter account appeared to tease some news for the franchise. Sadly, it only took a day to un-tease that news, deleting tweets and posting what amounted to a “whoops, our bad”. ■ **NC**



ISHGARD'S GREATEST

FFXIV ACTOR DIES



The *Final Fantasy XIV* community paid their respects to voice actor Stephen Critchlow, who gave an outstanding performance as Edmont de Fortemps. Vigils were held across servers, with players gathering outside the character's house to sit around campfires and pay their respects. ■ **MT**

REAL-WORLD SOMA

BRAIN COPYING



The humble SSD might be good for more than storing the latest games, as tech giant Samsung has plans to map a human brain right onto one. That's right, taking your brain in its squishy state and transferring it to solid state, all in the name of science. ■ **JR**



The anonymous hacker leaked the files on 4chan and claims it contains the “entirety of twitch.tv, with commit history going back to its early beginnings” and “we have completely pwned them”.

incident for Twitch has been taken in-stride and public reaction has for the most part calmed. The latter was probably helped by the fact that the wealthy streamers whose Twitch earnings were leaked weren't particularly mad about it, with most pointing out you can roughly calculate it from publicly available subscriber data anyway.

So it may have been as bad as it could possibly be, but there's another takeaway: just how common such incidents now feel, and the general apathy this has engendered. Did you remember, for example, that Twitch was hacked in 2015?

One person who does is Twitch's former head of PR Chase (no surname), who now runs his own company StreamElements. “Most major platforms get breached at least once, so how brands react to it often defines a company's reputation more than the breach itself.” Twitch's public response was fast, dealt with the biggest concerns (no credit card info or logins leaked), and after the initial community shock and reaction things have settled. “The fallout from the 2015 breach didn't last long,” says Chase, “with the community more upset about having to conform to using more complex passwords than the breach itself, so they will get past this one too.”

This is a reminder that gaming-adjacent accounts are an ongoing target for hackers, and every service you use is vulnerable. There's little that you can do other than the usual steps around password security and having common sense online. Major hacks of gaming companies are now just a fact of life and, as such, no wonder they can seem like background noise. The Twitch hack may yet make a big bang – at time of writing no part two has arrived, but could still – but already feels like it's fading into memory.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

War Thunder fans

Classified documents were leaked in a War Thunder forum spat... again.

Oculus without Facebook

A 17-year-old was hacked-off about the Oculus Quest 2's requirement for a Facebook account, so he coded a workaround called Oculess.

Corporate kickoff

EA and FIFA have had a falling out, with EA announcing that *FIFA* will probably be rebranded next year.

Crypto origins

The creator of cryptocurrency Ethereum says he created it because he was upset by nerfs in *WoW*.

Navy cyberdefence

The US Navy announced it was 'hacked' after one of its ships began streaming *Age of Empires* sessions.

Agent KIA

Rockstar finally confirmed what we all knew anyway: the studio's game *Agent* is not going to happen.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

A while back, The Spy was investigating Netflix and its rumoured push into gaming. Prowling through executive offices, The Spy's search had turned up empty. Until, that was, The Spy stumbled upon a script that had fallen discarded down the back of a sofa. Based on its title, The Spy assumed it was a treatment for a *Splatoon* adaptation, and so moved it to a nearby desk and added a note saying it was approved for filming. If you can't find the rumours, The Spy decided, *make* the rumours.



THE SPY
The Spy's shared universe was thought too niche and alienating for US audiences.

This, it turns out, was a mistake. The Spy has been informed that the show – *Squid Game* – has nothing to do with videogames. Worse still, The Spy is now being bombarded with elevator pitches as Netflix attempts to recreate the virality and buzz of its newest hit. Blank envelopes are being left at The Spy's dead drops, with high-concepts like “Battle Royale meets *Animals of Farthing Wood*?” scrawled on the back. Dead-eyed researchers harass The Spy on the way to the shops, shouting increasingly desperate ideas – “isekai in which the lead character is a former 19th century industrialist who wants to bring railways to the Elven kingdom?” – in the hope of approval.

All of this would be bearable if not for the fact that Netflix also

announced that it has acquired *Oxenfree* developer Night School Studios, so somehow The Spy *also* missed that.

Just now a pigeon landed on The Spy's windowsill, the note on its leg reading “RING BUT IT'S A TIKTOK CHALLENGE”. Clearly it's time for The Spy to shift focus to another media conglomerate. Enter Warner Bros, who, according to a Reddit leak loosely corroborated by VentureBeat reporter Jeff Grubb, is making a *Smash Bros* inspired fighter featuring characters from across the company's many brands and licences.

SHAGADELIC

According to the Reddit post, confirmed characters include Shaggy from *Scooby Doo*, Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings*, Tom & Jerry, Fred Flinstone, Mad Max, and, er, Batman. This, of course, is bizarre, as is the origin story cited in the post: that the project is inspired by the Ultra Instinct Shaggy meme. Google it. The Spy is not going to debase The Spy's self any further by explaining Dragon Ball Z-adjacent *Scooby Doo* memes here.

It's certainly tempting to dismiss this all as nonsense, but Warner Bros does have form crossing the streams of its various properties. *Space Jam: A New Legacy* is an extreme example, going beyond the original film's Looney Tunes premise to introduce the concept of the Serververse – a shared digital universe contained within Warner Bros' digital server, where Elma Fudd visits the world of *Austin Powers* and Speedy Gonzales cameos in *The Matrix*. So yes, Shaggy fighting Gandalf is a weird concept, but it doesn't approach the sheer level of absurdity a premise as flimsy as “WarnerMedia subsidiary properties” could achieve. You could theoretically see *Casablanca*'s Rick Blaine fighting *FEAR*'s Alma Wade. *Batman vs The Postman* from Kevin Costner's *The Postman*. Rick from *Rick and Morty* vs Jack Torrence from *The Shining*.

Obviously The Spy's first instinct is revulsion; to reject the notion of a holding company as the basis for artistic expression. But The Spy's second instinct is to pitch it to Netflix in the hopes that it will persuade them to leave The Spy alone. Spy out. ■
The Spy

BATMAN VS THE POSTMAN FROM KEVIN COSTNER'S THE POSTMAN

This month in... 2011



1 An interesting parallel: here in 2021, we're delving into Riot's upcoming plans. Back in 2011, we were doing the same for Blizzard. The issue features previews for a bunch of Blizzard projects, from *WoW*'s *Mists of Pandaria* expansion to *Diablo 3* and “Blizzard *Dota*” – the then name for *Heroes of the Storm*. It's been some time since Blizzard felt this essential.

ISSUE
234, Christmas 2011
ON THE COVER
World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria
IN THE CINEMAS
The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1

2 This issue featured more 80+ scoring reviews than we can fit into this tiny space here, but highlights include *Saints Row: The Third* and *Battlefield 3*.



3 Need some vaguely PC-themed Christmas gift ideas? Well you're in luck! How about a *Lego Star Wars* clock? Or an ice cube tray depicting Han Solo trapped in Carbonite? Or a jar of Baconnaise? These, as well as some actually useful PC gaming peripherals, underpinned what was mostly an excuse to get photographed in some festive jumpers.

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few years' 8/10*
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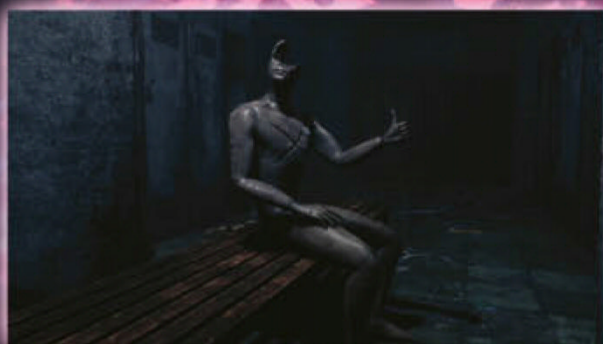
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



CAR TALK

An aspiring full-time fan translator finds his calling with Square RPG **RACING LAGOON**

In 1999, Japanese RPG developer Squaresoft was on top of the world. *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* were blockbuster successes and every other quirky RPG it released seemed destined to become a cult classic. But even at the peak of its popularity Square was still releasing games it decided were too niche, too hard to translate, or too Japanese to release in the West. One of those was *Racing Lagoon*, an RPG that blended trendy street racing and bizarre, almost poetic writing into a game that nearly defies description. Imagine if E E Cummings wrote the script for a *Fast & Furious* movie and you'll be on roughly the right track.

Twenty-two years later, *Racing Lagoon* is finally playable in English – and we have a fan translator who goes by the name 'Hilltop Works' to thank for channelling its singular style into English, in the process coining the best gaming diss since 'spoonie bards'.

"This lady who's the boss of Chinatown throws an insult at you, and I wanted to use 'green beans', an insult no one's used before, I don't think," he says. "But you hear it and you kind of understand what it means, you know? 'Green beans' means someone who's kind of young, not fit to be where you are. The line was, 'Get it, green beans? Chiantown has rules.'"

In Japanese the insult is something simple like 'brat', but the goofy localisation works in a game that's famously quirky even in Japan. Hilltop says *Racing Lagoon* has had something of a rediscovery at home in recent years, because even there there's nothing else like it. "They call the speech Lagoon-go, 'go' meaning accent, where every character adds in random English words and speaks very poetically."

FAN UP

Hilltop works in videogame QA by day and on the *Racing Lagoon* translation in his spare time, aided by a team of volunteers who are divvying up the hefty script. He discovered the game by chance when someone brought it up in Twitch chat and soon became enamoured, taking it on as his second-ever fan translation project after *Dr Slump*, a PS1 game based on the comedic manga Akira Toriyama created before *Dragon Ball*. In both cases he decided to translate them himself because he wanted other people to see them.

"This game is wild. This game is absolutely nutters crazy. There is just nothing like it, at all, and people need to see it," he says. "I think of this game like a beautiful diamond. It's a pure crystal – no part of it could really ever be recreated." The late '90s street racing aesthetic is intensely nostalgic for 30-somethings who grew up



Tune up

PancakeTaicho cites *Racing Lagoon's* music as the main reason he fell in love with the game. "The soundtrack is a world unto itself that I just wanted to hang out in all the time," he says. If you want to buy a super rare CD of the jazz fusion saxophone wailing over techno, be prepared to pay as much as \$1,000.

LEFT: Yokohama's identity eroding as Western culture seeps in is a running theme in *Racing Lagoon*.

RIGHT: Try PS1 emulator Duckstation if you want to crank the resolution up to 4K.



THE LIVERY *Syd-88 dishes on some of Racing Lagoon's iconic cars*



86-LEV

"Based on the Toyota AE86, your starter car was modified for extra power over the standard variants in-game."



R30

"Your team leader boasts a machine that's normally unobtainable. It's based off the '83 Nissan Skyline Super."



MINI

"Racing Lagoon has a host of imported machines. This Mini, a 911, Camaro, and more exotics await you..."



MONSTER-R (R33 GTR)

"This unique R33 has a real-life counterpart: built by a now defunct tuning shop, it's a proper monster!"

watching *Initial D*, playing *Gran Turismo*, and lusting after Nissan Skylines. While *Dr Slump* was a solo project for Hilltop, once he announced *Racing Lagoon's* translation, people who also love the game kept reaching out to help. 'Automotive consultant' Syd-88 doesn't speak Japanese but has a decade of experience with *Racing Lagoon* and is advising on all sorts of car terminology. PancakeTaicho, who's helping translate, lives in Japan and actually tried to hack *Racing Lagoon* a few years ago, but lacked the technical chops to pull it off. All told, there are now eight people contributing to the localisation.

Every successful fan translation of a videogame is a tiny miracle, even when they aren't as long or bizarre as *Racing Lagoon*. Each requires a translator, someone fluent enough in two languages to transpose both literal meaning and style. That's already rare, but that translator also has to understand the ins and outs of programming to be able to decrypt a game and get to the text in the first place. They have to be able to solve technical challenges, like figuring out how to fit English letters into a space designed for more compact Japanese characters. And they have to do all of this on their own time, for free, purely because they really, really like a particular videogame. If a single person can't handle every task, they have to find a team with complementary skills and the same passion willing to spend months or even years working together just for the satisfaction of it.

Hilltop has found the process "hugely" fulfilling, though, in a way no paying job ever has been. He studied

computer science in college but never became a full-time programmer, and started learning Japanese years ago by listening to tapes on his commute. "What could I do with these two skills? It was fan translation," he says. "I wanted to do something with my life. I was unemployed at the time, not really doing very well. And I had never really produced anything – ever, really – for public consumption or anything like that."

For the first three months he was just trying to understand how to hack into *Dr Slump* and wrap his

head around data compression, a field of programming he didn't have any experience in. His notebook from the start of that project is filled with pages of assembly language code that he was trying to debug. Finally he understood it and was able to extract the script. On *Racing Lagoon*, the same process took only two days.

While most fan translators seem

content to treat it purely as a hobby, and others are professional translators who take on the occasional passion project, Hilltop is somewhere in the middle. He started a Patreon for Hilltop Works, which states that if he can get 600 monthly backers, he'll quit his job and work on translation patches full time. Hilltop and his team are currently releasing new translation patches every time they complete a chapter, and he hopes to see a burst of interest – and support – when the whole thing's finished.

"If I could do this forever, I would. 100%," he says. "I would much, much prefer this to just about anything." ■

Wes Fenlon

EVERY SUCCESSFUL FAN TRANSLATION OF A VIDEOGAME IS A TINY MIRACLE

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

DANCE OFF

How a martial art made **DEATHLOOP**'s invasions irresistible

Dinga Bakaba is the game director of *Deathloop*, Arkane's brilliant, breakthrough FPS. He's a veteran of the *Dishonored* series, going back 11 years. But most importantly for our purposes, he's a martial arts teacher on the side. Specifically, Bakaba teaches capoeira.

"People sometimes wonder, is it a dance, is it a fight," he says. "But we say, 'a game of capoeira,' and the act is playing." The boundaries of capoeira are intentionally blurred – it was first invented by African slaves in Brazil, as a way to practice fight moves under the cover of dancing and music. You might know it by the distinctive moveset of *Tekken*'s Eddy Gordo, the human rotor whose unpredictable leg spins end with a foot to the face.

It's often less combative than that, though: in the courses Bakaba runs, capoeira partners tend to look more like lovers than fighters. Moves are mirrored, legs soar over heads, and despite the proximity, the hits never quite connect. It's mesmerising.

"When I arrived at my first capoeira class, they said it's a game," Bakaba says. "I asked them, 'What are the rules?' And they looked at me like, 'That's for you to figure out.'"

Capoeira can be combat; it can be strategy; it can be exhibition. But brilliantly, the nature of the game isn't determined beforehand. Instead it's communicated wordlessly between the players.

"It's not choreographed," Bakaba says. "It's entirely a dialogue, with attacks, counterattacks, acrobatics, and body expression." You could just as easily apply that description

to *Deathloop*'s invasions. Whenever two players are connected online – one taking the role of protagonist Colt, the other becoming his nemesis, Julianna – they're likely looking to kill each other. Their hands are glued to guns and grenades. But their first job is to feel each other out.

"The first thing to do is observe the partner," Bakaba says, slipping into the language of capoeira. "What their body movement tells us. It's the same with *Street Fighter*. If you look at the footsies, how people go front and back, stay crouched in their corner, or come jumping and dashing to get close, that tells a lot about what they are about, and you can start baiting. It's very martial arts."

LIGHTNING COLT

Some Colt players treat invasions as a deathmatch – forgoing other goals to hunt Julianna as she skulks around the map. Others doggedly pursue their AI target, PvP be damned. Many simply want to hack the antenna that unlocks the map's tunnels and sprint for the exit. If a Julianna player is to stand a chance of cornering Colt in one of *Deathloop*'s huge levels, they have to watch closely, predict their partner's behaviour, and act accordingly.

"Are they aggressive? Are they sneaky? All this is interesting information," Bakaba says. "If they are avoiding enemies, then you know that if you make them panic, they have a chance of alerting those enemies. That will slow them down, put a marker on them, making it easier to chase them." Once the battle is joined, the mindgames continue as players feint and poke at each other. "You're always trying to trigger a reaction," Bakaba says.

It might sound markedly less benevolent than capoeira lessons. But since *Deathloop* launched, some players have managed to turn even Colt and Julianna's eternal fight into a dance. "It's all about player agency and how you want to engage with that Colt, to the extreme of helping them out," Bakaba says. "When you're playing as Julianna, there's no real objective besides making matches and having fun."

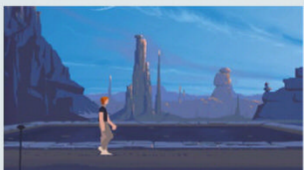
Invasions sit at the opposite end of the spectrum to *Deathloop*'s campaign, which always tells you what to do and where to do it. "If we changed things around so that the multiplayer was very objective-driven, then you start having a right way to play, and that's not really what we wanted," he says. "It's interesting to think about where you need guidance, and where you can let players free to make up the rules and find their own thing."

Bakaba's next project is bound to wind up feeling a little like capoeira. "It's something that's part of me and how I look at interactions," he says. "It's a dialogue, always." ■

Jeremy Peel

BACK AROUND

The games that brought Dinga Bakaba to *Deathloop*



ANOTHER WORLD

"Very inspiring. It's all silent, so everything is expressed through body language. Knowing it was made by a French man made it seem possible."



WOLFENSTEIN 3D

"The action and fluidity was extremely impressive at the time. The immersion, the weapons, the violence – and seeing the tricks the level designers played."

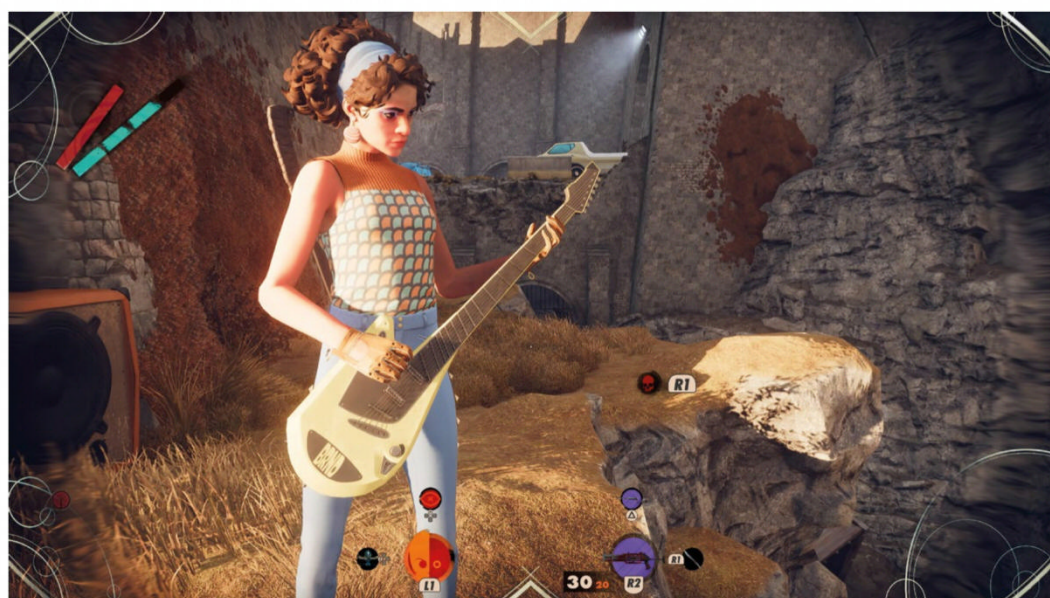


ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

"You're discovering the ecosystem – which monster is hostile to what creature, where do underground rivers go. The interactivity had a strong impact on me."

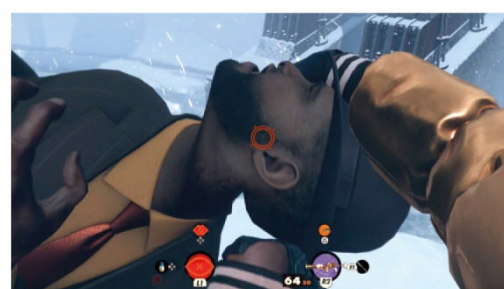


SOME PLAYERS HAVE MANAGED TO
TURN EVEN COLT AND JULIANNA'S
ETERNAL FIGHT INTO A DANCE



FAR LEFT: Colt may have three lives, but Julianna's got six strings.

LEFT: Can't crouch your way out of this one, matey.



DNA Training

EXPLORED

INFINITY WARD WAS LEFT
WITH A GAPING HOLE ON ITS
FLANK, AND SLEDGEHAMMER
FILLED THE BREACH

SISTER SLEDGE

How **SLEDGEHAMMER** stepped in to save *Call of Duty*

As you swim through the submerged Brooklyn Battery Tunnel with Delta Force, the headlamps of your submersible light up the side of a rusted gas tanker. Two faces stare back, from the logo of Schofield and Condrey Construction Ltd, a fictional company that has quite literally gone under. But there's no time to linger: a Russian submarine is waiting to be commandeered in New York Harbor, and *Modern Warfare 3* will instafail you for falling behind.

Most wouldn't know that the two faces belong to Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey, the cofounders of Sledgehammer Games. This fleeting fanfare was all the studio would get as it made its debut at the heart of the biggest entertainment property in the world – and exerted huge influence over the concluding part of *Modern Warfare's* water cooler campaign trilogy.

It wasn't the game Sledgehammer was supposed to make. Composed primarily from *Dead Space* veterans, the studio was set up within Activision to work on a third-person *COD* spin-off dubbed *Fog of War*. Set during America's notorious entanglement with Vietnam, it's easy to imagine how it might have applied the developer's experience with claustrophobic horror to the tight tunnels of Cambodia. But just months into development, crisis hit Activision. Infinity Ward's Jason West and Vince Zampella left the company in deeply acrimonious circumstances to make *Titanfall* – and a huge chunk of the *Modern Warfare 2* team marched out with them.

MODERN WORRY

Infinity Ward was left with a gaping hole on its flank, and Sledgehammer filled the breach. As two acclaimed leaders

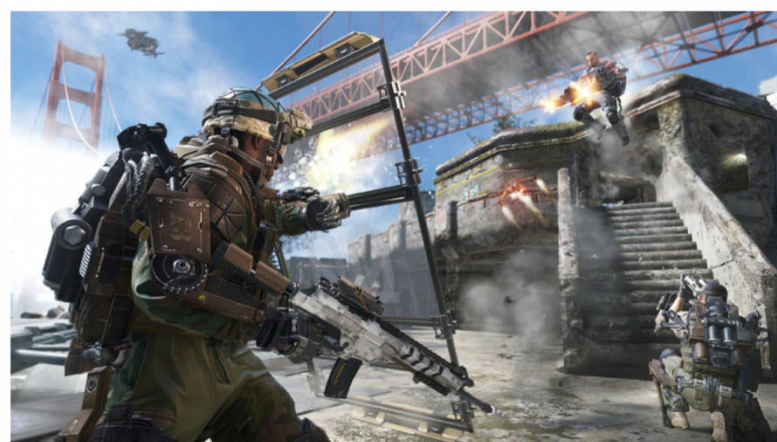
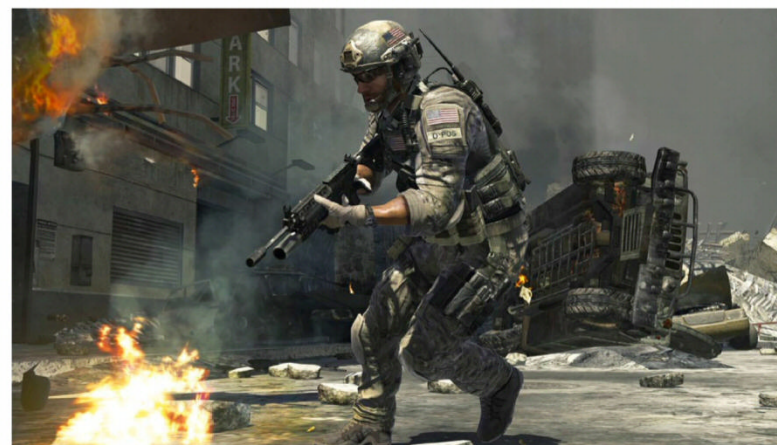
and storytellers departed, two more walked in. Schofield and Condrey picked up the baton with the aim of tightening up a “sketchy” story. *Modern Warfare 2's* campaign had been stuffed with brilliant Bond moments – the snowmobile jump, the favela rooftop chase – but in the pursuit of ever-bigger explosions, Infinity Ward appeared to have concussed its screenwriters. The *Modern Warfare 3* team responded by paring back the number of playable characters and tying up loose ends with the elusive Russian ultranationalist, Makarov.

What they didn't do was pare back the bombast. *Modern Warfare 3* treats Europe's oldest cities as a big toy set, toppling the Eiffel Tower and filling out the London Underground exclusively with terrorists in order to get away with a Tube crash that makes *Skyfall's* equivalent look tame. At times this leads to tonal ugliness – it's hard to grin through a blockbuster that treats a sentence like

“All civilians at the Louvre are dead” as background radio chatter. But the best setpieces stick the landing, because they're paired with moments of intimacy. You can't help but laugh in delight as a US serviceman pushes his body right up against the wall of a cargo plane, dodging the dinghy you're riding into the hold as enemy ships explode all around.

BELOW: *MW3's* tinny, insubstantial gunfeel plants it firmly in its era.

BOTTOM: Troy Baker takes *Advanced Warfare's* starring role.



FISH IN A BARREL

Who else makes *Call of Duty*?



INFINITY WARD

It took years, but the original *COD* studio has recovered well from the *Modern Warfare 3* debacle – bringing on Naughty Dog talent that has bolstered its storytelling.



RAVEN SOFTWARE

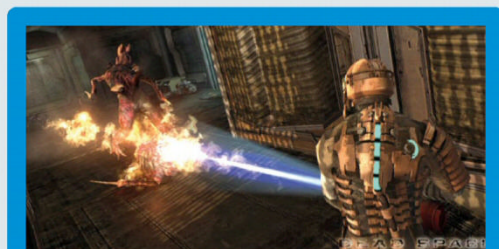
This '90s survivor is riding high as the lead studio on *Warzone* – not to mention *Black Ops: Cold War's* accomplished spy fiction single-player.



TREYARCH

Still beloved for its expertise in tight and frenetic multiplayer, Treyarch appears to have all but given up on making story campaigns.

DNA Tracing



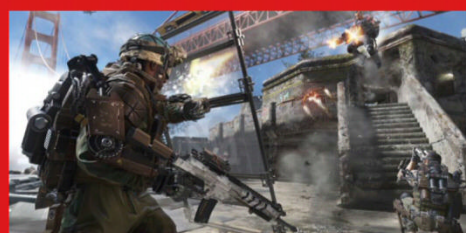
DEAD SPACE

Story-driven horror from Schofield and Condrey.



CALL OF DUTY: FOG OF WAR

Cancelled Vietnam game from the *Dead Space* team.



ADVANCED WARFARE

Perfect premise, poorly executed.



MODERN WARFARE

Made *Call of Duty* a phenomenon.



MODERN WARFARE 2

Brash and bold. Maybe too bold.



MODERN WARFARE 3

Co-developed by Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer.



CALL OF DUTY

The original WWII great.



CALL OF DUTY: WWII

Conservative but classy.



CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD

The post-WWII birth of special forces.

FROM THE FORGE

The arc that brought Sledgehammer here



» Ultimately, Sledgehammer can't be blamed for *Modern Warfare 3*'s inherited failings. Infinity Ward had already escalated its 'behind the headlines' premise to world war, and not even Captain Price could strongarm the genie back into the bottle. Yet Sledgehammer had achieved a miracle – stepping so nimbly into the shoes of the most acclaimed developer in the FPS genre that nobody even noticed the switch. Players wouldn't truly feel West and Zampella's absence until *Call of Duty: Ghosts*.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

While that disaster happened, Sledgehammer took the opportunity it had earned and then some: the chance to take ownership of a new *Call of Duty* sub-series. Naming it *Advanced Warfare* was a statement of intent. This would be the first COD in many years to have a clear purpose, highlighting America's increasing dependency on private military companies. What if, it asked, creative differences led a US-funded yet stateless army to launch a coup?

It's unfortunate that Sledgehammer chose Kevin Spacey to embody the PMC threat – what was once a prestige piece of casting is now a black mark against the game. But *Advanced Warfare*'s many performance captured scenes anchor its alluring premise, letting Schofield and Condrey deliver on their dream of a story-first COD – one in which moments of spectacle are accentuated by the downtime in-between. Moreover, these are places you want to spend downtime in. One mission, set among the duck egg blue domes of Santorini, is a striking reminder of the blockbuster's capacity to take you away to the world's most beautiful locations, even if just to hunt terrorists.

Advanced Warfare's downfall lay in design. Even for *Call of Duty*, a series so linear it's best treated as interactive theatre, this entry was notably restrictive – its failstates quick and frustrating should you dare to poke your rifle off your allotted path. Worse, the QTE that ended *Modern Warfare 3* turned out to be dark portent, predicting sequences that resemble the command-following game Bop It!. Only in the campaign's closing missions does *Advanced Warfare*'s exosuit begin to feel like a tool for freedom and expression.



LEFT: Noticed this fella in *Transformers* the other day. It's a small world of blockbusters.

BELOW: Eventually devs will need to stop aping Spielberg and tell these stories in new ways.

WORLD WAR 2.0

Those faults were largely corrected in Sledgehammer's *Call of Duty: WWII*. In some senses it was a step back – conceptually less bold than *Advanced Warfare*, leaning into the familiar imagery of D-Day and French countryside firefights. But this was less a soft reboot of the original COD than the very first *Medal of Honor* – embracing espionage with a centrepiece infiltration that requires you to memorise your papers.

The fighting, too, recalls the classic PlayStation shooter – granting enemies a catalogue of staggering animations that makes encounters feel desperate and scrappy. Best of all, Sledgehammer folds everything back

into the squad – scrapping health regeneration and pushing you to look to your AI teammates for health kits and ammo. That mechanical investment leads, soon enough, to emotional investment.

Since then, Schofield and Condrey have both left Sledgehammer – the former now working on a spiritual successor to *Dead Space*, and the latter setting up a new studio for 2K. Dozens of developers have followed them out the door, and for those who remember Infinity Ward's exodus, it feels as if history could be repeating itself.

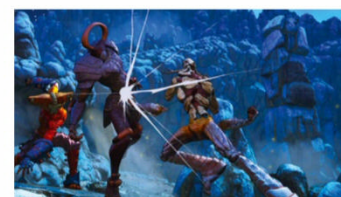
Then again: Sledgehammer's new *Call of Duty*, *Vanguard*, is a post-WWII story about the hunt for Hitler's fictional successor. The message seems clear: when history comes around again, it doesn't have to happen exactly the same way. ■

Jeremy Peel

THOSE FAULTS WERE LARGELY CORRECTED IN SLEDGEHAMMER'S CALL OF DUTY: WWII



Clash: Artifacts of Chaos



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
ACE Team

PUBLISHER
Nacon, BIGBEN INTERACTIVE

LINK
aceteam.cl

CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS

ACE Team returns to the weird and wonderful land of Zenozoik

Zeno Clash is known for two things. First, a setting inspired by classic fantasy illustration. Second, harsh beatdowns. The shock for newcomers is how well these aspects combine. True, chain-whipping a bird with teeth is an odd way to appreciate a world that often feels like it belongs in a gallery, but it hammers home the anatomical detail.

Clash: Artifacts of Chaos – the first Zeno game in almost a decade – pulls back the camera to third-person without, so far, ruining this peculiar blend of incredibly storied aesthetics and wanton brutality. The new viewpoint accompanies an expanded premise with new subsystems such as gear crafting, beefier multiplayer, and a ‘Ritual’ minigame that functions like an arcane modding feature. But even as it zooms out, the threequel also zooms in – adding depth to the combat with a stance system and attack cancelling, while preserving the bruising feel and style of the original games.

Clash is the story of Pseudo, a rangy orange hermit in braces. As the adventure begins, he wakes from troubling dreams and hears a mysterious music that guides him to the Boy, a monstrous yet endearing bundle of feathers with startling yellow eyes. The Boy has certain gifts that render him of great interest to Zenozoik’s ruler, Gemini, mistress of the titular Artifacts. In becoming the kid’s companion, Pseudo must fend off her minions while excavating his own past as the forsaken student of a legendary warrior.

FAMILY MATTERS

The premise recalls *God of War*, but it’s also the kind of story ACE Team is good at telling. “[*Zeno Clash* was] a story about a man in conflict with his own family,” says Andrés Bordeu, cofounder. “But over

time, you discover that there’s a larger world, there are forces overseeing everything. In this game, we’re diving even deeper into that idea of something grand and mysterious that you don’t see from the beginning. It starts super-small – this character forming a relationship with this creature and becoming his foster parent.”

The Boy perches on Pseudo’s shoulder during play, taking to the air when the punching starts. He’s no pugilist, but he’ll help you explore – squeezing through gaps to gather treasures unless hindered by terrain variables such as swarms of mosquitoes, which see him peering miserably from Pseudo’s shoulder bag. He can be taken captive, but you can rescue him by following the peculiar music that binds Pseudo and the Boy together.

“Music is going to be a main driver for the story, and it has kind of helped us design the world,” Andrés Bordeu notes, adding that, “It’s music that drives them to find a certain key locations”.

The Boy can also talk to birds in order to send messages to other players, which brings us to *Clash*’s heavily From Software-influenced, yet powerfully idiosyncratic, take on multiplayer. By sleeping at campfires Pseudo can enter a dream world that functions like a multiplayer lobby, with other players appearing as wraiths who can be greeted and fought over peer-to-peer connection.

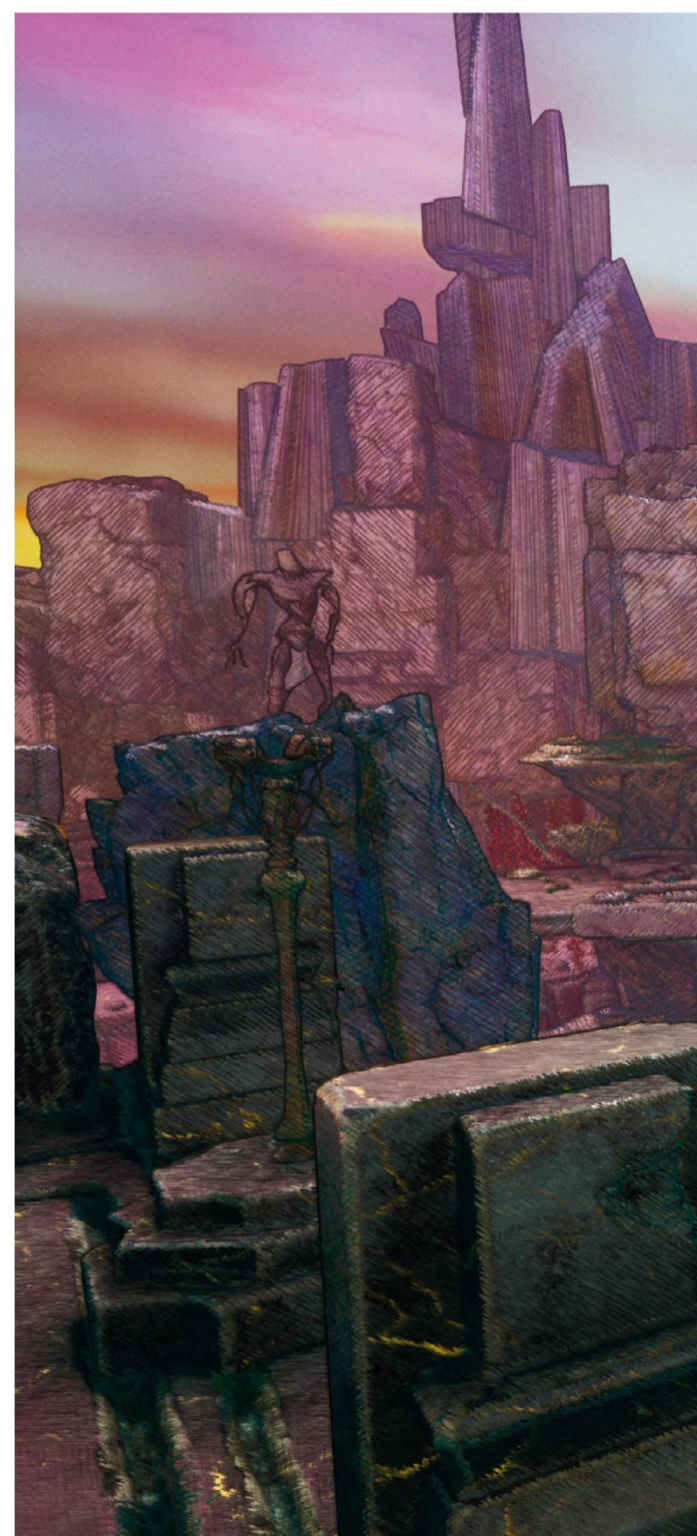
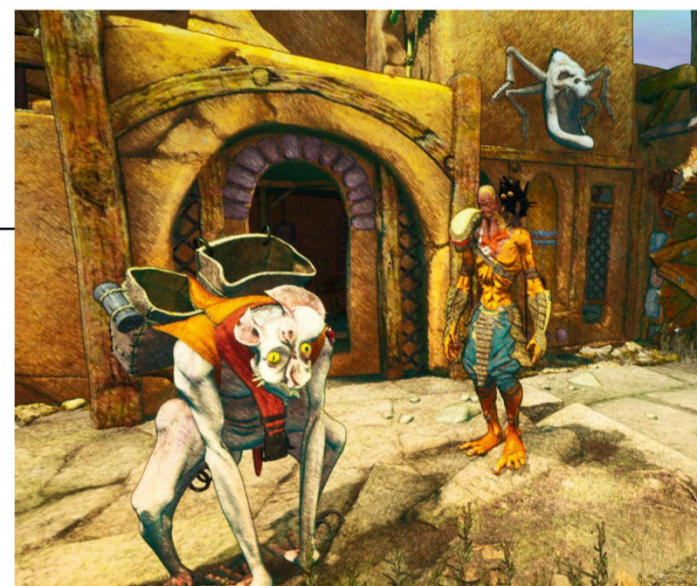
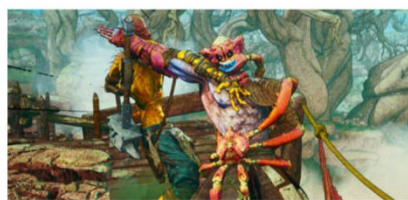
While there’s no trace of PvP at day, the story will ask you to visit the night-time world at intervals, and the dream harbours riddles of its own: Pseudo appears here as a wooden marionette. “It’s not a fully featured co-op game,” says Andrés Bordeu. “It’s a reinterpretation of what *Dark Souls* does with phantoms, so the interactions between players – helping people, fighting bosses, all that happens in our game in this different plane and not in the main campaign.”

The combat certainly sounds like it’ll shine in PvP. ACE Team is working on around nine melee stances with upgradeable movesets, plus special

FIRST
LOOK

CLASH IS THE STORY OF PSEUDO, A RANGY ORANGE HERMIT IN BRACES

Clash: Artifacts of Chaos



>> attacks and weapons such as bone clubs. While you start out with just one, you can eventually hotkey three stances and three specials at once. The Boxing stance is the all-rounder, a sturdy beginner's pick. Mammoth is about slow but devastating elbow drops, while Lightning is for speedy combos. Slash is the crowd control stance, while Spear does out straight punches that keep you out of grabbing distance during tougher one-on-ones.

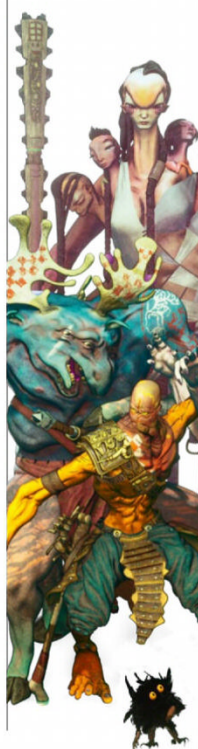
It's mouth-wateringly technical, but what really sells it is Pseudo himself: huge hands and feet, coiled shoulders and forearms, knees and elbows you could split boulders with. It's a pleasure to watch him work, hammering angry rhino folk off balance and sweeping the ankles from beneath squidgy, grinning ogres.

ACE is particularly proud of the ability to cancel attacks into a dodge or special move, a la *Street Fighter*: as cofounder Carlos Bordeu says, "This is one of the central, unique things that makes *Clash* feel very different to other third person combat games." But the combat's showpiece feature is surely the option to finish a brawl in first-person, battering enemies around with maximum prejudice at the cost of peripheral awareness.

RITUAL COMBAT

Enclosing all this is the Ritual, a ceremonial pre-fight dice game, played both by NPCs and other people online, that gives *Clash*'s often-frantic brawling a sense of theatre and structure, even sportsmanship. Influenced by the quickdraw duelling mechanics of *Ghost of Tsushima*, it's played by wagering the titular Artifacts of Chaos, which oblige the loser to fight with a variety of disadvantages. Players can skew their dice rolls by placing spikes on the board that, for example, flip dice in a line or lock down parts of the board.

The consequences of losing the Ritual are many, strange and unpleasant. You might have to fight while chained to a pole or in a cloud of mist, or while dodging a swarm of hornets. Lest all this sound like a nuisance, ACE is exploring options to streamline or skip this aspect of *Clash*, but doing so feels like missing out on a vital piece of the narrative. "The ritual is a pretty significant part of the story



THE CONSEQUENCES OF LOSING THE RITUAL ARE STRANGE AND UNPLEASANT

because the main antagonist has these master Artifacts which give her control over the people of this land," Andrés Bordeu comments.

Where previous *Zeno Clash* games were essentially closed paths, *Clash* is very open-ended, spreading out from a town hub with crafting facilities to sporing jungles and snowy mountainsides. Those unsettling silhouettes on the horizon can actually be visited this time, and there are crafting materials and Artifacts to find together with shortcuts between areas.

WEIRD SCIENCE

If there's the fear that *Clash* is taking too many cues from other franchises, rest assured that this is very much an ACE Team universe. Andrés Bordeu is elusive about how this version of the Zenozoik world relates to the settings of the previous games. "In the first *Zeno Clash*, you encountered what we call the endworld, a civilisation that was far more developed but kind of dormant, and that no one dared explore. That kind of setting is suggested here, but it's more in decay and you're counting up the remnants."

All this reflects not just the developer's interest in surrealism but a bigger investment in technology (and people – *Clash* is the work of 25, in addition to outsourcing). The game runs on Unreal Engine 4 but has its own custom rendering system. "With *Zeno Clash 1* and *2*, we went deep into the shapes, the lighting," Andrés Bordeu says. "But the rendering and presentation of the surfaces still felt kind of traditional. We've invested a lot of work in this kind of illustrated direction, based on the fantasy books of the 1980s." It makes for an arresting vista, even next to the grandest of open world blockbusters. Landscapes are vivid up close but desaturate with distance, as though the illustration were fading back into the paper.

Zeno Clash 2, as ACE Team has admitted, was too ambitious for the resources at its disposal. It wanted to be the blockbuster sequel, but couldn't go the distance. *Artifacts of Chaos* feels like a game that's learned from that mistake. Its horizons are wider, but not at the expense of the moment-to-moment. Its inspirations are overt – we rarely hear developers talk so straightforwardly about their influences. But in key respects it's the same old *Zeno Clash* – lulling you with its visual imagination, only to boot you squarely in the jaw.

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



LEFT: Switching to first-person beatdown mode may get you surrounded.

BELOW: ACE Team is targeting four-player online multiplayer.



PREVIEW

Oxenfree II: Lost Signals



ABOVE: Maybe don't jump over the incredibly dangerous chasm, Riley?

RIGHT: What a cosy fisherman's hut.



Oxenfree II: Lost Signals

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
Night School StudioPUBLISHER
MWM InteractiveLINK
nightschoolstudio.comOXENFREE II:
LOST SIGNALSSpooky tech and masked gangs
haunt Night School Studio's sequel

It's been five years since the first *Oxenfree* – the story of a group of teenagers who accidentally disturb something ancient on an eerie island – and after a brief bar crawl through hell in *Afterparty*, developer Night School has returned to the spooky series with *Oxenfree II: Lost Signals*.

It follows closely in the footsteps of the first game. There's another haunted island, and more mysterious radio frequencies making electronic equipment go haywire. However, this time you play as Riley, a researcher returning to her hometown to investigate this unnatural phenomenon, and as she spends more time looking into the signals she begins to unveil the secrets that the island holds.

In the first game, the teens on Edward's Island unwittingly opened portals, but now on Camena a masked group called Parentage are deliberately trying to access these gateways, harnessing the power of the portals to pull something through – though exactly what is a mystery for now. Parentage is using radio frequencies to carry out their plan and, although radios were your main guide in the first game, walkie-talkies take centre stage in *Lost Signals*.

The walkie-talkies in *Oxenfree II* are what I'm most excited about, as they have the most potential to create some incredibly creepy moments. Throughout your time on Camena you'll receive ghostly messages on your device from

other residents affected by the island's supernatural anomalies, and you can often get calls from people you don't know. The voices can ask for favours or just have a conversation, but it's up to you whether you answer or not. Who could resist having a casual chinwag with a mysterious stranger?

The majority of our demo isn't on the island at all, but beneath it, in a series of spooky caverns. It's an hour into the game and Riley and Jacob are traversing the island's shadowy tunnels when they come across a 'time tear'. Using the same radio tuning system as the first game, Riley begins to open the tear, which transports the two into 1899 when the caves were still being used as mines. It looks like hopping through different pockets of time will be an exciting new addition to the story, although it's not entirely made clear whether they'll be getting caught up in the tangles of different timelines or just passing through.

TALK RADIO

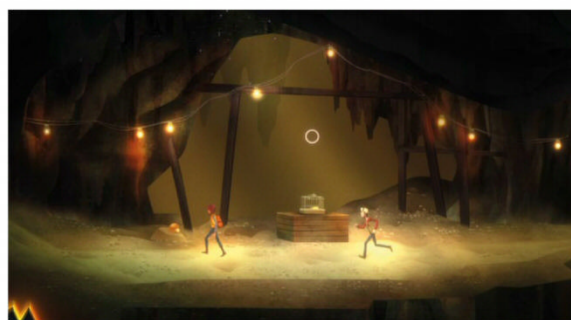
Oxenfree's celebrated dialogue system stays completely intact, and the decisions you make in conversation will directly affect the game's story. One of these changes is with Riley's island-exploring partner Jacob. Picking certain dialogue bubbles will impact

the nature of your past together as well as the current relationship between the two of you. Night School has also confirmed that there will be multiple endings to *Lost Signals*, saying that there's a wide range of outcomes – more than in the first game.

Almost everyone from the original development team has returned to make this sequel, and certainly it shows in the familiarly spooky vibes of the island. Traversing the area will be more dangerous than before, though, and Riley will have to choose different paths to take – whether she should try and jump across a rocky chasm, or find a safer but slower way around, for example.

Oxenfree II: Lost Signals looks to be another chilling entry in the series. I'm all for more haunted technology, and the walkie-talkies look to bring something eerily new to the game. It's due out in 2022 and already feels like an adventure that'll leave you with major goosebumps.

Rachel Watts

THE WALKIE-TALKIES IN
OXENFREE II ARE WHAT I'M
MOST EXCITED ABOUT



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December

DEVELOPER
Image & Form, The Station

PUBLISHER
Thunderful Publishing

LINK
mageform.se/game/the-gunk

Rani and her friend Becks are trying to pay off the mortgage on their spaceship.

THE GUNK

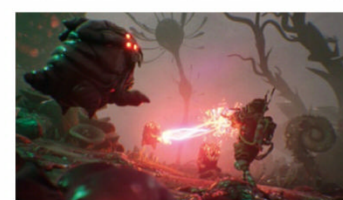
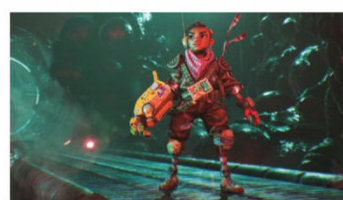
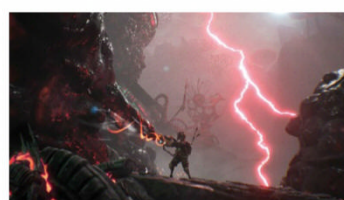
This game absolutely sucks. But, er, in a good way

Have you ever watched those pressure washer YouTube videos, where you just watch decades of grime getting satisfyingly blasted off a bit of decking until it looks shiny and new again? Basically that's the feeling developer Image & Form is trying to evoke in this sci-fi adventure.

NEW
INFO

As plucky but poverty-stricken space explorer Rani, you discover a planet seemingly barren save for huge, pulsing, red-black blobs of the eponymous gunk. But with your handy power glove you're able to suck it all up, allowing lush, green flora to reclaim the land before your eyes. Though I'm concerned where all that slime is actually *going*, cleaning up the world looks wonderfully satisfying.

And this developer certainly knows satisfying. Image & Form is the studio behind the fantastic *SteamWorld* games, each of which boasts its own brilliantly engaging gameplay loop – along with



plenty of charm and cleverness. You might ask, why isn't this game called *SteamWorld: Gunk*? The answer is it's a collaboration with less known developer The Station – I&F is providing the game design and art style, but The Station is bringing its expertise in animation.

It certainly seems to be working out as a combo. The alien environments are absolutely gorgeous, both before and after cleanup, and there's a lovely variety to them – it seems like you barely have chance to get used to one lush vista before you discover another. Even the main character is delightful to look at. Though human, she has the endearing proportions of a *SteamWorld* robot, with a chunky little body, spindly limbs, and one huge glove. The way she scampers around

the environment and hops up ledges makes her seem like she's having as much fun as the player.

STICKY SITUATION

There's more going on here than looks, of course – cleaning up gunk increasingly requires some light puzzle-solving and platforming, as well as combat against the slime's angry minions. But our demo shows it to be a light and probably quite brief adventure without much challenge.

That is by design, though – Image & Form wants *The Gunk* to be both as accessible as possible and 'respectful of the player's time', embracing brevity and variety over difficulty spikes or repetition. Combined with its calm vibes and gentle interactions between characters, it looks like a chill afternoon or two's gaming in the making. If you've played any of the *SteamWorld* games, you'll know this is one to watch – they've all been excellent at distilling a genre down to a lovely, light loop that doesn't outstay its welcome. *The Gunk* looks set to continue that trend in three dimensions.

Robin Valentine

THE ALIEN ENVIRONMENTS ARE ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS

Join the conversation!



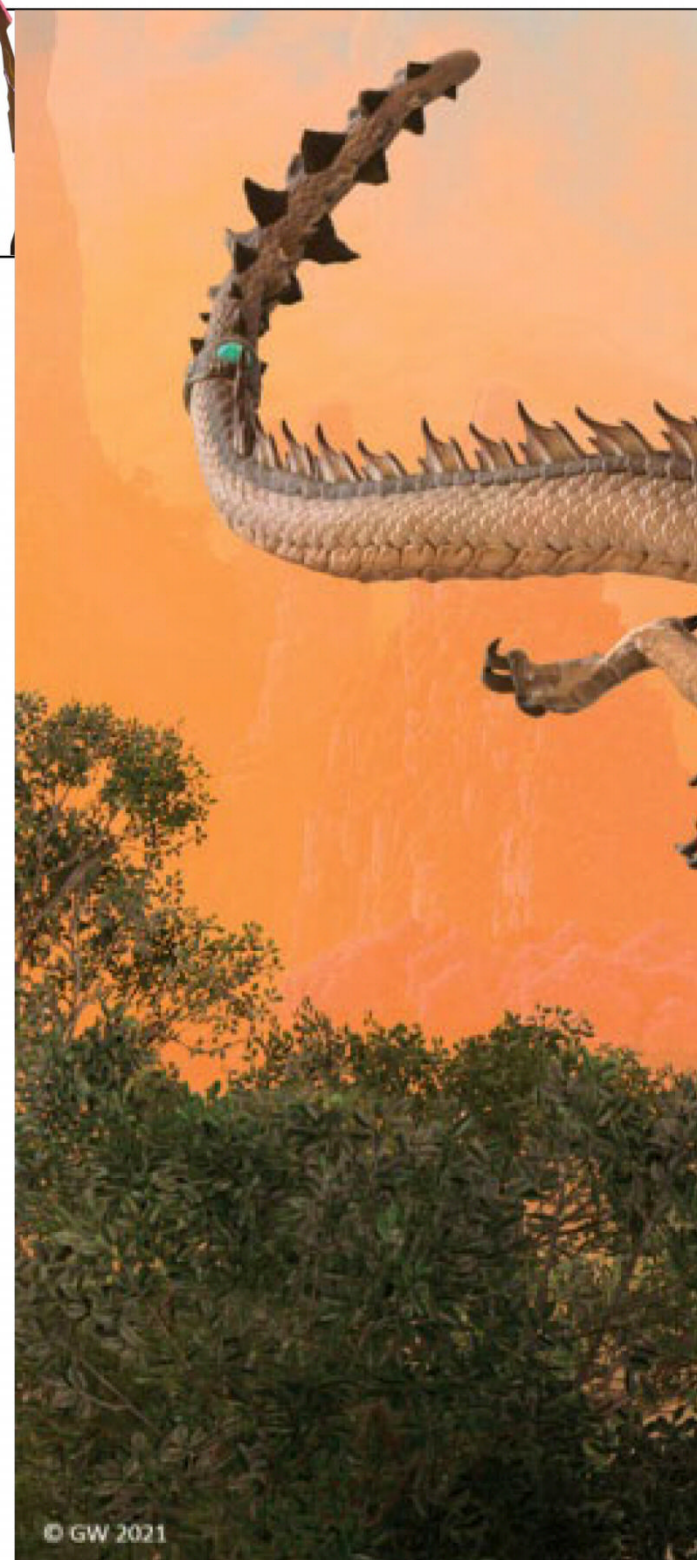
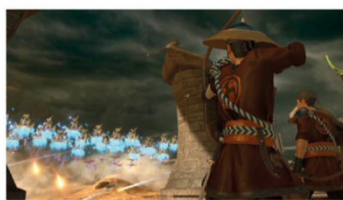
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PC GAMER

PREVIEW

Total War: Warhammer III



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
warhammer3.totalwar.com

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Adding a whole new faction to a forty year old setting

As I watch the Tzeentch forces bear down upon the fortress defended by Cathay, I'm blown away by how different it all looks to any *Warhammer* battle I've seen before. The Tzeentch are alluring with their palettes of neon purples, blues and greens, brightening up the battlefield with colours from well beyond the earthy *Warhammer* spectrum.

Cathay, meanwhile, are the first faction ever fully depicted from *Warhammer's* Far East, led by a dynasty of dragons capable of taking human form. Naturally, they're analogous to Ancient China; sky lanterns halberds, elegant armour adorned with robes and dragon imagery, and towering terracotta sentinels defending the *Warhammer* world's answer to the Great Wall. So seeing this bright demonic force raining blue and pink fire over the high walls and ornate roofs of a Far Eastern fortress – it's all pretty unexpected.

DAEMON DAYS

My preview of *Total War: Warhammer III* gave me a glimpse into the Tzeentch army, but the main focus was on Cathay, a faction that's never had a miniatures range on the tabletop, never had an army book or codex, and is being expanded by Games Workshop in tandem with the development of *Total War: Warhammer III*. It's testament to the series' success that they now get to see – and contribute to – Games Workshop's *Warhammer* Studio building out a faction before their eyes.

MAINTAINING THE HARMONY BETWEEN YIN AND YANG IS CRITICAL FOR GRAND CATHAY

Game director Ian Roxburgh gives a little insight into this. "When you're seeing that process from the beginning and you're able to input into those chats early on it's a really rewarding experience for us, and something we've never done before," he says. "It's a compliment to the way our relationship with Games Workshop has developed over these eight years that there's enough mutual trust for us to work in this way together."

One key concept that Creative Assembly plucked from reality and turned into an in-game system is Yin and Yang – the Taoist belief that reality is shaped by opposing forces existing in constant complementary balance with each other. Both in battle and in the campaign, maintaining the harmony between Yin and Yang is critical for Grand Cathay.

Buildings, technologies and units all tilt the balance towards Yin or Yang, and you'll need to be mindful when managing your economy and armies to gain those Harmony bonuses. In battle, the law of Yin is associated with the Moon Empress and affects mainly melee units, while Yang applies to ranged units, so keep these troops together to get those buffs.

NEW
INFO

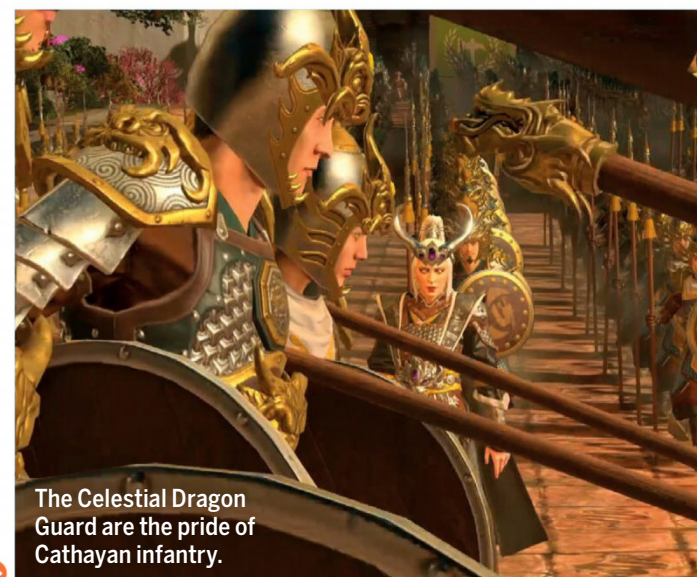
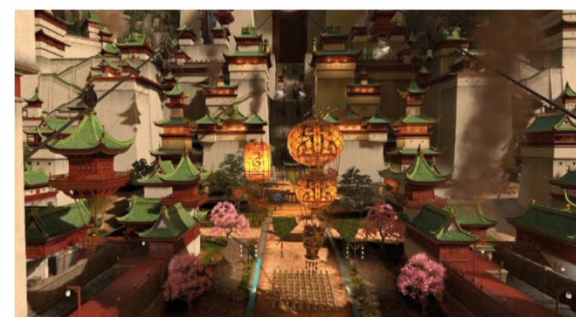
IN TUNE

Another benefit of Harmony is Spell Mastery, whereby the more of Cathay's spellcasters you have on the battlefield, the more powerful their spells become. While Cathay is by no means a magic-oriented faction, this gives them a little edge over enemies, whose magic usually draws from a single mana pool.

The theme of balance is fitting for an army that, according to Whitston, is the crucial jack-of-all-trades in a *Warhammer* game that will otherwise feature some of the most out-there factions in the series.

"The Cathay are a great faction, particularly for newer players or those familiar with the Empire roster, because they cover all bases pretty well without necessarily excelling at some of the top-end stuff," says Whitston. "But they have got some amazing special units."

Back on the battlefield, the Tzeentch aerial forces make their move – flying purple stingrays called Screamer, and Doom Knights, aerial cavalry that surfs through the skies aboard magically propelled hoverboards. They make quick



The Celestial Dragon Guard are the pride of Cathayan infantry.



ABOVE: The Storm Dragon Miao Ying guards the Grand Bastion to the north of Cathay, keeping Chaos at bay.

LEFT: These poor peasant archers are no match for the looming Doom Knights on hoverboards.

PREVIEW

Total War: Warhammer III

RIGHT: The Terracotta Sentinel exhibits some impressive martial arts moves for a big guy.

BELOW: The vibrant colour palettes of Tzeentch taking on Cathay brighten up the battlefield.



Total War: Warhammer III

Boomy-firing Crane Gunners can be used on the ground or fly around in Sky Lanterns



>> work of the peasant troops manning the walls, though I rightly suspect that Cathay has more military tricks up its sleeve.

The clear standouts are the two Legendary Lords, the Storm Dragon and Iron Dragons Miao Ying and Zhao Ming. These two children of the Celestial Dragon Emperor can switch at will in battle between human and dragon form. When I ask the developers why one wouldn't keep them in dragon form all the time, it once again returns to the theme of Harmony.

"In human form, the Lords have massive Harmony amplifiers, but if you see a greater demon on the battlefield, then you'll probably want to attack it as a dragon," lead writer Andy Hall tells me. "You're going to lose a bit of Harmony, but you've got a big dragon on the battlefield – there's a risk-reward strategy to it."

Not that these dragon-kin are wanting for power in human form. Once the Tzeentch breach the walls, I witness Miao Ying chew up a battalion of crab-clawed Forsaken using the Talons of Night – a vortex spell that summons giant scaled claws from the ground to stun enemies.

The Cathay start to offer some aerial resistance too, as the Crane Gunners – rocket-launcher snipers, essentially – pick off the Tzeentch forces from their distant Sky Lanterns. Zhao Ming, meanwhile, transforms into a serpentine dragon, shooing away the Doom Knights descending on Cathay's deadly but fragile Sky Lanterns and Sky Junks.

FORTS AND PRAYERS

The Grand Bastion, a towering fortress built by Cathay to keep the forces of Chaos at bay, is a beautiful showcase of the more layered, vertical city design in *Total War: Warhammer III*. This new approach makes the part of the battle after a city's walls have been breached more strategic than ever before. As the Pink Horrors – Tzeentch's rather cute and expendable Boglin lookalikes – scamper through streets, they're picked off from the upper tiers of the city by cannon fire, while in other parts the attackers are redirected towards ambush points by buildable barricades.

And while the Minas Tirith-like layers of the Grand Bastion may be unique to

Cathay, the developers tell me that all the factions in the game will benefit from the new siege mechanics and city designs.

In adding Cathay to the game, Creative Assembly opens us up to a vast and previously unexplored part of the *Warhammer* map. Upon launch, the campaign will focus on the northern and western regions of Cathay, governed by Miao Ying and Zhao Ming, but the empire is surrounded by intriguing territories.

Just to the east across the sea is Nippon, *Warhammer's* axiomatic equivalent to Japan. To the south, past the realm of the troublesome Monkey King, are the equally under-documented Kingdoms of Ind – where cat-faced beings and tiger-headed Beastmen are said to dwell. I ask how far we can expect future DLC to expand into Cathay's neighbouring territories. "When going further afield and into the stuff that hasn't been developed by Games Workshop until now – we never say never – but when it comes to Nippon and Ind, that's not on the radar at the moment," Roxburgh tells me.

DRAGON IT OUT

When I pry for information about whether the three other Cathay Dragon children – each governing their own province of the Empire – will feature down the line, Andy evades a direct answer by pointing out that there are "four missing Dragons as well". Cunning diversion, or redirection towards a subject more in line with what Creative Assembly are working on? With the lore alluding to the possibility that some of the dragons may have been corrupted by Chaos, I couldn't help but wonder whether we could face a scenario where dragons return for the bad guys.

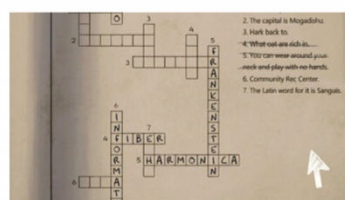
But back at the Battle of the Grand Bastion, there's enough novelty to keep my mind from foraying into fan-theories. The Tzeentch Exalted Lord of Change flies up to an upper layer of the city to take out some Cathay artillery, summoning one of the faction's most powerful abilities – the Storm of Fire – to his aid; the camera tilts up to the skies where, high above the city and the floating pagodas gleaming in the golden sunset, a whirling neon vortex opens up, raining cyan splatters from the Chaos dimension down upon the city.

I never see the end of the battle as the camera fades to black, but I see enough to be amazed at the series' ability to surprise five years on. And to think that all it took was a faction inspired by Ancient China and a lurid army of neon demons...

Robert Zak

I WITNESS MIAO YING CHEW UP A BATTALION OF CRAB-CLAWED FORSAKEN

Frank and Drake



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Appnormals TeamPUBLISHER
Chorus Worldwide GamesLINK
bit.ly/2WyxPw

FRANK AND DRAKE

Shelley you can't be serious?

You would not, perhaps, expect a game inspired by the legendary novels *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to feature a David Hasselhoff mural and the ghost of Marvin Gaye. It's already clear that this is a game keen to defy any expectations you may have, and the results are truly unique.

Although the exact time and place of the setting is unclear, it's a grounded, prosaic world. The demo opens with 'Frank', clutching a bag of groceries to his chest, slowly making his way to his apartment via striking rotoscoped animation. Before long he's sharing the apartment with 'Drake', although they will apparently never meet. Frank works days and Drake works nights – they communicate only via notes.

Frank and Drake is pleasingly difficult to kick into a genre pigeonhole. There are elements of visual novel, point-and-click and narrative choice-driven adventure that take turns to drive the experience. Sometimes, you're doing nothing more than advancing text, or holding a button to move your character along. Other times, you're solving puzzles or making a choice which will have consequences for the other character.

Some choices are locked in the demo, but how I choose to spend my time as Frank – who helps maintain the apartment block – affects what I find as Drake when he moves in. For example, he requested a room with no windows (totally normal request, no alarm bells to be rung there).

FRANK AND DRAKE IS PLEASINGLY DIFFICULT TO KICK INTO A GENRE PIGEONHOLE

As Frank, I decide to fix the water blockage in the roof, but don't have time to see to the room. Drake therefore doesn't find a leaky ceiling, but he has to block the window himself, and the room is a mess.

VAMP IT UP

It's not a story concerned only with humdrum experiences, though even the most tame of events feels otherworldly. The combination of comic book art and the laid-back, melancholy (for Frank) or jazzy (for Drake) music is mesmerising, fitting the nature of the game well. Drake having visions while out on a walk feels no less suited to this world than Frank trying to fix an exercise bike in the basement.

As *Frank and Drake* still seems to be some distance from release, I hope that some of this time is spent on accessibility. Both characters keep a diary, which contains important story and background details not provided anywhere else. The faux-handwriting font used is difficult to read even before taking into account the small size of the text.

The full game will take place across seven days, and I've experienced just some of the first. It's not nearly enough room to understand how the two characters will affect one another – or themselves, as choices also seem to determine what sort of person each becomes – but I'm fascinated to find out. I'm also keen to see how far the game takes the supernatural elements that are hinted at. Does Drake *really* see ghosts or are they, as he speculates, just hallucinations? How vampiric is he? What's the significance of Frank's amnesia?

Hopefully, the full game will have more consistent puzzle design to smooth the path to my finding out. I *loved* finding that there was a crossword lying on a table I could actually fill in, but most of the demo puzzles were overly simple (such as a memory card game, connecting dots around and under other dots, and finding objects hidden behind or in something else). The infuriating exception was a zoetrope which demanded that I arrange animation images in the correct order, which saw me use some – ahem – monstrous language. Nonetheless, I look forward to getting my teeth into more.

Luke Kemp



"Yeah, their music is really good, but you wouldn't have heard of them."



ABOVE: Contains pawnographic content.

LEFT: Two literal paths to choose between.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Baldur's Gate 3



ABOVE: Next year I'm picking where we go on holiday.

RIGHT: I somehow doubt the message is 'Free Hugs'.

FAR RIGHT: Baldur's Gate 3's sneering animations are the best I've ever seen.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
[baldursgate3.game](https://larian.com/baldursgate3)

BALDUR'S GATE 3

Shadows and Sorcerers dominate patch six of Larian's RPG sequel

I've visited few virtual places more aptly named than Grymforge, the newest area added to *Baldur's Gate 3*'s slowly blossoming Early Access build. Located deep in the Underdark, Grymforge is a crumbling gnomish fort surrounded by shadowy caverns. It's full of traps, precipitous drops, disgusting monsters, and a nasty history that includes ritual sacrifice and suggestions of cannibalism.

Grymforge represents my first encounter with *Baldur's Gate 3*, and it's certainly a striking point to drop into the game, like kicking off a weekend break in Paris with a tour of its catacombs. Even that doesn't do its atmosphere justice, as Paris' subterranean vaults aren't filled with duergar slavers forcing gnomes to mine riches for them.

Mercifully, your party is just passing through Grymforge. Or at least, you would be if the path to your destination of Moonrise wasn't riddled with death-dark (think shadows, but hungrier). To get past them, you need to acquire a moonlight lantern from a drow named Nere, who oversees this motley crew of duergar. Unfortunately, Nere is trapped on the other side of a cave-in, and all the whipping in the world won't enable the enslaved gnomes to dig through the rubble.

If it wasn't already made clear by the whole 'worm inside your brain' plotline, *Baldur's Gate 3* is intent on taking players to some seriously dark places,

both literally and figuratively. Nere's duergar thugs are an unpleasant bunch and about as trustworthy as a bridge made of snakes. I don't want to delve too deeply into the plot of this area, but basically Grymforge is a tinderbox ready to combust. It's up to you whether you want to douse the flames or light the spark, and it isn't clear which will give the better result.

SORCE CODE

A fitting place, then, to introduce what is perhaps the most unpredictable of *Baldur's Gate 3*'s classes, the Sorcerer. Unlike wizards, who gain their magical power from knowledge and research, Sorcerers are born with enchanted spoons in their mouths, innately imbued with arcane talent. Their power is driven not by intelligence, but by charisma, which means their abilities grow alongside the force of their personality.

Because their spellcasting derives from innate power rather than learning, Sorcerers don't get access to the same range of spells that Wizards do, but they make up for that in how they can cast their spells. In combat, Sorcerers get access to a pool of sorcery points, which can be used in various ways. You can spend sorcery points to gain extra spell slots, or spend spell-slots to get extra sorcery points.

It's an enjoyably flexible system, enabling you to come up with powerful combinations. But the unlearned nature of Sorcerer magic comes at a price. A Sorcerer's casting is subject to the whims of a mechanic known as Wild Magic, which can trigger a random effect whenever the Sorcerer casts. These effects can be beneficial to your fight, or detrimental. At one point, one of my sorcerers cast a fire orb spell, and as a by-product spawned a fire drake that began attacking my party.

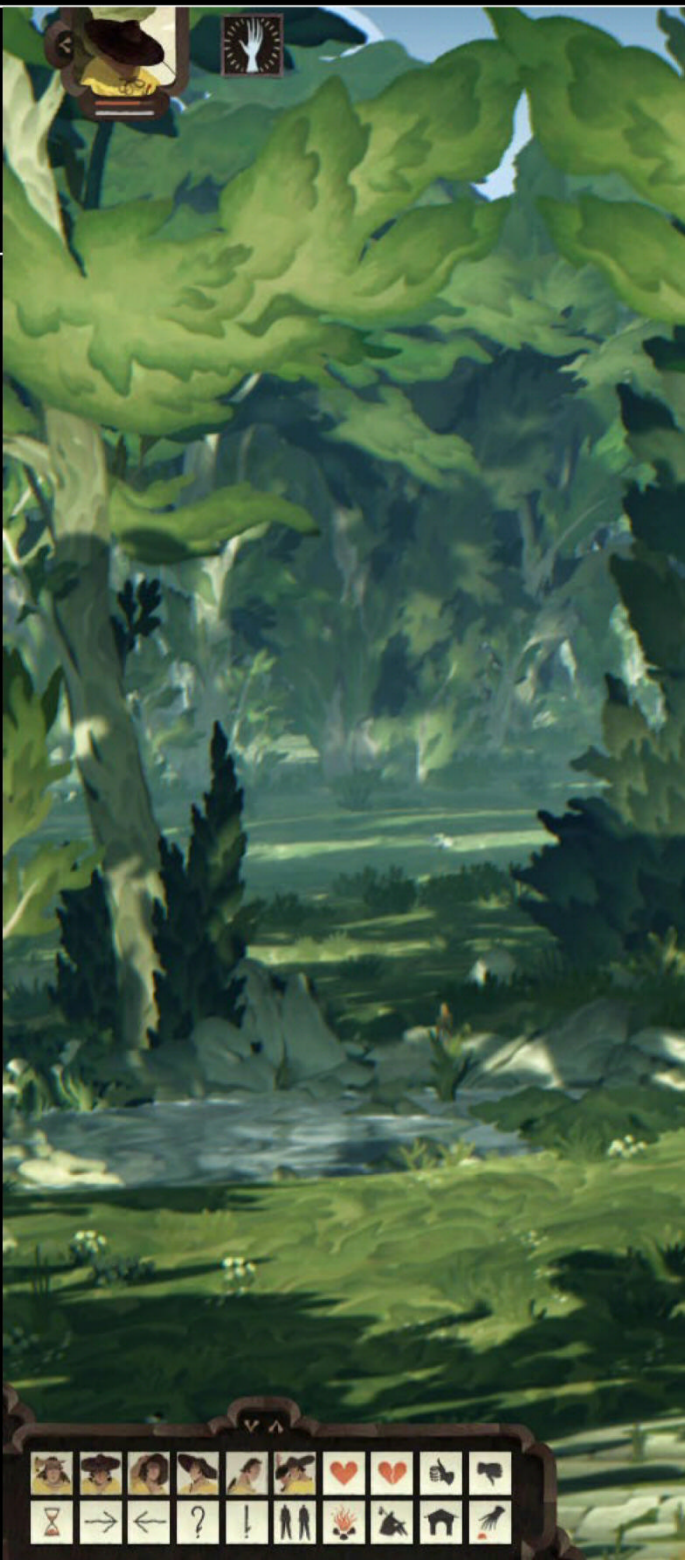
Despite playing through Grymforge with minimal context, I found myself getting sucked into this island of nastiness. A few stability issues aside, the production values are top notch, particularly the duergar voice-acting. Impressed as I am by Larian's willingness to drag players into the murk with them, however, I do hope there is some light at the end of this dank and miserable tunnel.

Rick Lane

BALDUR'S GATE 3 IS INTENT ON TAKING PLAYERS TO SOME SERIOUSLY DARK PLACES



Book of Travels



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£23.80

DEVELOPER
Might and Delight

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
mightanddelight.com

BOOK OF TRAVELS

Might and Delight is out to create a new kind of MMO

I'm in high spirits as my wanderer picks flowers in a meadow. I'm musing about what tea I could potentially brew with my findings when I'm suddenly ambushed by a heinous bandit. Unable to defend myself I make the courageous decision to run away, flowers and bruised pride in tow.

Might and Delight's MMO *Book of Travels* may seem like a world filled with sunshine flower picking – and for the majority of my ten-hour time playing, it was – but the serene lands of Braided Shore also has its dangers. But every wanderer knows what lies off the beaten path is worth discovering, and *Book of Travels* wants to explore every aspect of being a nomad, even if peril lies somewhere in the wilds.

Outside of my encounter with the rude robber, my time with *Book of Travels* has been nothing short of soothing. It's not your traditional MMO – there are no insistent storylines, pulling plot threads, or really any actual direction. You just simply explore the world at your own pace, shaping your journey as you go.

My character is a Mosswalker, a class that specialises in 'spirituality' and 'sociality'. The avatar creator is laid out like a character sheet from a TTRPG, and you're able to choose specific traits. I created a meditative monk who has the uncanny ability to see ghosts, able to walk up to gravestones and accept magical boons from the spirits resting there. There's a lot of mysticism in Braided

PLAYED IT

Shore, and the game boasts an intriguing approach to magic systems.

In *Book of Travels*, knots and tea brewing are your main gateway to magical abilities, but unfortunately I've not been able to access them. Knots are written in a magical language that someone needs to teach you, but I have searched everywhere for them to no avail. I thought I might try my hand at tea brewing, but it requires recipes and ingredients that are way out of my current price range as a newbie. I understand that *Book of Travels* wants to teach you these systems as you would in a real magical world, but it makes it pretty unfriendly for beginners.

BOOK SMART

My lack of magical qualities doesn't stop my mossy medium though. Since there's no main story, you're just left to your own curiosity. There are some NPC side quests but most of them only seem to involve the humdrum of trading items. Braided Shore works entirely on this trading system, with merchants offering differing prices for your wares. Outside of bartering, some NPCs will give you cryptic messages that will lead you to items, others will talk about the game's lore that's currently shrouded in mystery.

You can also see other players, but they are purposefully few and far between with only seven per server. There's no chat box in *Book of Travels*, so you'll need to become versed in the art of emoji. My encounters with other players so far have been nothing more than silently walking through lush meadows and rocky mountains until our paths part ways, a polite wave emoji ending our journey together.

These quiet encounters and *Book of Travels*'s relaxing vibe are both something that I really appreciate. However, in its current state, there's really not much to do even for an Early Access game. You can see all the ideas that Might and Delight has, but much of it is just currently unfinished – which is not that surprising when you learn that the studio plans for it to stay in Early Access for two years. Personally, I'm satisfied with walking through some incredibly lovely scenery picking shrubs and the like, but that won't be enough for everyone.

Rachel Watts

MY TIME WITH BOOK OF TRAVELS HAS BEEN NOTHING SHORT OF SOOTHING





ABOVE: The owner of this mill will trade you bread for the oddities you find on your journey.

LEFT: Each blue flower represents one backer in the Kickstarter campaign.



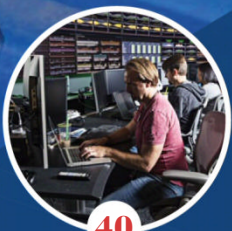


MAKING

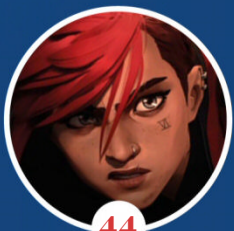
RIOT GAMES is bigger than ever – and if it gets its way, this is only the beginning

MAYHEM

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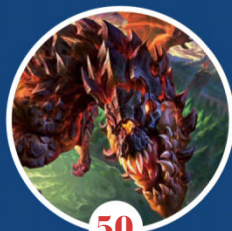
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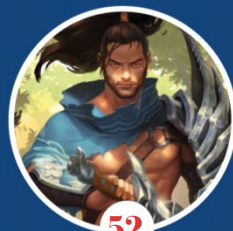
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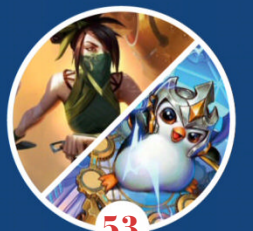
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GO ALL OUT

RIOT GAMES' co-founder talks about its past, present, and ambitious future. *By Steven Messner*

It doesn't matter if you love or hate *League of Legends*, you should be paying attention to Riot Games. It's hard not to, actually, when right now it's taking over buildings in Paris, Singapore, and four other major cities, converting them into giant, interactive, promotional set-pieces – not to mention displaying a three-minute teaser on the facade of the world's tallest tower in Dubai. *Fortnite* and *Among Us* now have *League of Legends* crossovers, and all of Riot's games have just been hit with their own wave of big announcements, like *Legends of Runterra's* new singleplayer roguelike deckbuilder mode. And at the centre of this combo is *Arcane*, a gorgeous and epic new animated TV series set in the *League of Legends* world that premiered just days ago after the *League World Finals*. Riot knows how to make a scene.

The last two years have seen Riot evolve into something much more ambitious than just a game company: it's becoming a media giant where music videos, animated TV series, and games all feed back into and draw from a universe of characters that one day might – it hopes – rival titans like Marvel and DC. Though *League of Legends* is at the heart of that universe, it isn't just about teams

of five squaring off in a map divided into three lanes anymore.

Over the following pages, we're giving you a comprehensive look at Riot Games and the beast that it's becoming, starting with this interview with co-founder Marc Merrill about Riot's past and future. There's a lot happening over at Riot throughout November – more than we could cover in this story alone – but as Merrill tells me, it's all in service of one goal, "To deliver these 'oh my god' moments for players."

BIG SPLASH

'Oh my god' moments are something that Riot has become increasingly good at over the years. From surprise music videos to lavish opening acts at the World Finals punctuated by giant CG dragons storming the stage, Riot has been routinely pushing boundaries. But much of what's happening this November can be traced back to exactly two years ago, when Riot celebrated the ten-year anniversary of *League of Legends* with an avalanche of exciting announcements and big in-game events. *Arcane*, *Legends of Runterra*, *Valorant*, *LoL's* mobile version, an unnamed fighting game – all of these were revealed during the anniversary livestream, and in one fell swoop Riot became something new.

Despite being Riot's co-founder alongside Brandon Beck, Merrill and Beck no longer handle the day-to-day operations of the company. They're »



“WE’VE ALWAYS SAID WE ASPIRE TO BE THE MOST PLAYER-FOCUSED GAME COMPANY IN THE WORLD”

» focused on “offence”, as Merrill describes it, big-picture ideas that help shape the future of Riot and its games. That’s why *League*’s tenth anniversary was so close to his heart. “It was an opportunity to showcase not only to the world but to Rioters [the nickname given to employees] what Riot’s all about – who we are,” Merrill tells me. “The ten-year anniversary gave us an opportunity to take players back on a journey of how the company has evolved.”

Merrill says the moment was also born out of a realisation that with over 150 million players (8 million playing each day), any game Riot announced would likely disappoint a large section of its audience. After all, not everyone is into competitive FPSes like *Valorant* or card games like *Legends of Runeterra*. So instead of announcing one game and potentially leaving some *League* players disappointed, Riot announced six of them and a TV show.

“All of the growth that Riot’s had, and all of our future plans, are just a continuation of our mission as an organisation, which we’ve always said we aspire to be the most player-focused game company in the world,” Merrill says. “Because it’s really all about them.”

IN CHARACTER

The magic that’s turned *League of Legends* into the world’s biggest PC game doesn’t all just boil down to that ‘for the player’ attitude. After all, we’re talking about an intensely competitive game that takes thousands of hours to master and has

a reputation for toxicity that Riot is still trying to curb. There’s another key ingredient at work: *League of Legends*’ huge cast of characters.

Over the past decade Riot has slowly stitched together a vast fantasy universe and intricate backstories for each and every one of its 157 champions. And while many might not grab your attention, there’s such a huge amount to choose from that at least one is likely to catch your eye. “Our opportunity for players to explore these characters is relatively limited given the third-person isometric camera perspective and the click to move mechanic and only a handful of abilities,” Merrill explains. That’s why so much effort goes into the tiniest details, including lines of dialogue and animation. Everything about them has to be perfect.

“But I do think that it’s insufficient,” Merrill explains. “I think why players get so attached is we have the luxury and benefit of people playing a lot over time and having a long-term relationship with these characters and therefore they get attached. Because the champion roster was created to have these rich, diverse characters with different themes and personalities, we built this pop fantasy universe. And the range of what can be included in the [world of *League*] can be really robust, so there’s a lot of opportunity for creativity to be expressed in ways that still fit and make sense.”

It shouldn’t work, but it does because even if the setting might change, the characters stay rooted in an inalienable identity that makes



ABOVE: Riot Games has offices all over the world, including Los Angeles, London, Hong Kong, Dublin, Dubai, Istanbul, and more.

them become deeply familiar over time. This is most evident in *Arcane*, which explores the origin story of characters like Vi, Jinx, and Caitlyn with a shocking level of tragedy. *Arcane* tells its story with such conviction that you can't help but be drawn into it. "Our success has been built by a willingness to step into the unknown and trust heart over the science and business logic," Merrill says. "Rioters make things with love, and I think players can feel when something is made with love or not."

CULTURE SHOCK

That so much of what Riot produces is made with an uncommon level of artistry is evident, but Merrill doesn't like to shy away from the challenges either. Throughout our interview, he talked at length about the blood, sweat and tears Riot developers pour into creating these characters, the games and its wider universe. But the most important thing, he says, is trust. "Trust is the foundation of our teams," he says. "It enables collaboration, and it enables people to be on the same side of the table and to be oriented towards doing a better job."

But the problem with trust is that it is so easily broken. Back in 2018, Riot Games entered the spotlight in a very different kind of way thanks to widespread reports of its sexist and discriminatory workplace culture. As a result, multiple lawsuits were filed (some as early as this year), employees staged walkouts, government agencies got involved, and Riot's leadership had to try and find a new way forward.

Though the culture at Riot has reportedly improved, there's still good reasons to be concerned about whether Riot is truly a place for all



MARC MERRILL
Marc cofounded Riot Games with Brandon Beck in 2006, served as its co-CEO for many years, and now acts as co-chairman. The champion Tryndamere is named after his gaming handle.

types of people. "Riot takes every allegation incredibly seriously, and I think people generally believe that, which is important," Merrill says. "But I also think scepticism can often be healthy, and that our sceptics are coming from a good place. We believe Riot is about [certain] things, but is it? That's a healthy dynamic as long as it remains in that area of trying to make the company better, and the proof is really in how we execute and the progress we're making."

Even so, Merrill says he's confident that Riot is moving in the right direction. "I think that type of question is important to ask not just to Riot's leadership, but also to the rank-and-file and our female leaders and employees all over the world. And I think that any thorough analysis will conclude that the vast, vast, vast majority of Rioters believe in the company, leadership and the future of the organisation."

STRONG FINISH

Whether the lawsuits and allegations will ever stop looming over Riot is up to its leadership team and their willingness to hold everyone accountable. But even as

concerns about Riot's culture remain, Merrill says its 3,000-plus employees are as passionate as ever about chasing those 'oh my god' moments. And right now it feels like Riot's ambition is matched only by its ability to realise it.

That's the secret of what *League of Legends* has become: a vortex of pop culture and fantasy distilled into a cast of characters that transcend the physical boundaries of the three-laned map they battle over. A universe that isn't confined to games, music, books, or TV – but in whatever Riot thinks might exceed the expectations of its fans.

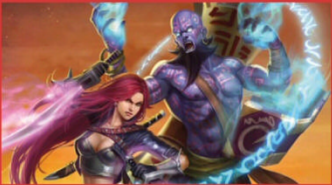
For Merrill, one of those moments was the 2018 World Finals, "We had 20,000 people in a stadium watching *League of Legends* being played as a sport with these incredible pro teams and great players, with a hundred million people watching it online, and a K-pop band with a sick music video and incredible track, with augmented- reality characters on stage. People were like, 'What? What?' So many different teams had to work together to pull off that moment, but that's the promise of what Riot can do." ■



RIGHT: Riot also publishes games by other developers, and even has a tabletop games division.

RIOT UNIVERSE

A rundown of all of Riot's games



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

An intensely competitive MOBA that's also the world's most popular PC game. Surely you've heard of *League of Legends* by now!

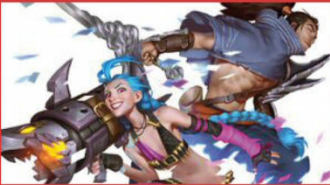
Our score: 82



TEAMFIGHT TACTICS

The autobattler that's effectively a *LoL* minigame, *TFT* is one part *LoL* and one part chess. A great way to wind down after a tough match.

Our score: N/A



LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

This spin-off card game gives *Magic: The Gathering* a distinct *LoL* makeover while innovating in key areas. Has some killer singleplayer modes too.

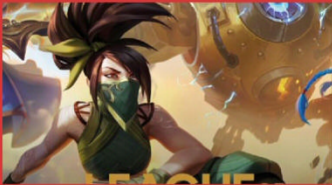
Our score: 85



VALORANT

Riot's take on hardcore competitive FPSes is unexpectedly brilliant – a kind of mishmash of *Counter-Strike* and *Overwatch*.

Our score: 90



WILD RIFT

The mobile spin-off of *LoL* is actually excellent. It features shorter rounds and is much easier to learn, and the controls are actually good. No, seriously!

Our score: N/A

PUNCHING UP

How two co-workers with a wild dream created
ARCANE. By Steven Messner

When Riot Games announced it was making an animated TV show two years ago, it made sense. After all, *League of Legends* trailers have been a fascinating apex of excellent music, animation, and alluring character vignettes. Who wouldn't want to see Riot's take on a sprawling episodic story? But unlike the trailers that laid its foundation, *Arcane* isn't just a gorgeous bit of animation set to some bangin' tunes. It's also a character-driven story about a family torn apart by ambition and oppression. And for co-creators Alex Yee and Christian Linke, *Arcane* is also a dream they've been working on for over six years.

"It's been such an investment that there's just a lot of excitement and giddiness for people to finally see the things that we've known for so long and never really been able to share with anyone," Linke says.

"It is the sense of having this hundred-pound baby finally being delivered to the world," Yee says. "The relief that I am anticipating from that is somewhat superseding the nerves of it being judged by everyone."

If you're not at all familiar with *League of Legends*' characters or wider backstory, have no fear: *Arcane* is the best entry point into Riot's weird world ever created. It's a

beautiful piece of sci-fantasy about two sisters torn apart by the tectonic shifts of scientific discovery happening in the twin cities of Piltover and Zaun. Over three acts each comprising three 40-minute episodes, *Arcane* explores the origins behind some of *League of Legends*' most iconic heroes – and just like its primary heroine, Vi, *Arcane* doesn't pull any punches.

Having seen six of the nine episodes, I can safely say that *Arcane* is the best animated TV series I've seen in years. It's not just the lavish animation, but how it's used to tell an intimate and tragic story of two orphaned sisters named Jinx and Vi who are pulled in opposite directions by forces beyond their control. It also has some of the most kinetic fight scenes I've seen in animated TV. And for Linke and Yee, it was the chance to bring life into characters that had been living in their brains for years.

ORIGIN STORY

It might surprise that Yee and Linke are not established showrunners at all, and that *Arcane* is their first-ever crack at making a TV series. In fact, when Linke and Yee started at Riot, it was working in customer support roles. Before long, though, Yee was promoted to a creative designer position, helping to conceive new *League* champions, while Linke became a composer who worked to define the aesthetic of *League*'s champion trailers.



» “Jinx and Vi have been close to us the entire time that we’ve worked at Riot,” Yee explains. “We both worked with the teams that originally created the champions.” For Linke, the two characters also represent big milestones in his career: Vi’s theme song was the first one to ever feature a vocalist and lyrics, while Jinx’s trailer was the first time Riot had paired with animation studio Fortiche, who later helped bring Arcane to life.

But the idea to turn these two characters into the leading stars of their own TV show wasn’t the result of some ambitious, corporate plan. The whole thing started grassroots as a passion project between the two friends, and most everyone at Riot barely knew it even existed. “In the very beginning this was a wild dream,” Yee says. “For us it was, like, we’ll go until someone stops us. So the first one or two years were just really about what is our tone? How do we represent these characters? How big do we want these stories to be? How many champions can we get into a story without violating the narrative of the core characters?”

“We had this very naive dream of seeing this kind of quality that you see in world-class animated features, but in a serialised animated series that goes as deep into the acting and narrative that our favourite shows go,” Linke says. “It didn’t exist, and we didn’t know how to make it, but we knew it needed to exist.”

GROWING PAINS

Making an animated TV series isn’t something you just do. It takes enormous teams of talented artists years to bring projects like this to life

– not to mention Linke and Yee’s dream of doing the impossible and taking the quality of Pixar and injecting it into 360 minutes of TV. All Riot had was two twenty-somethings in need of a reality check.

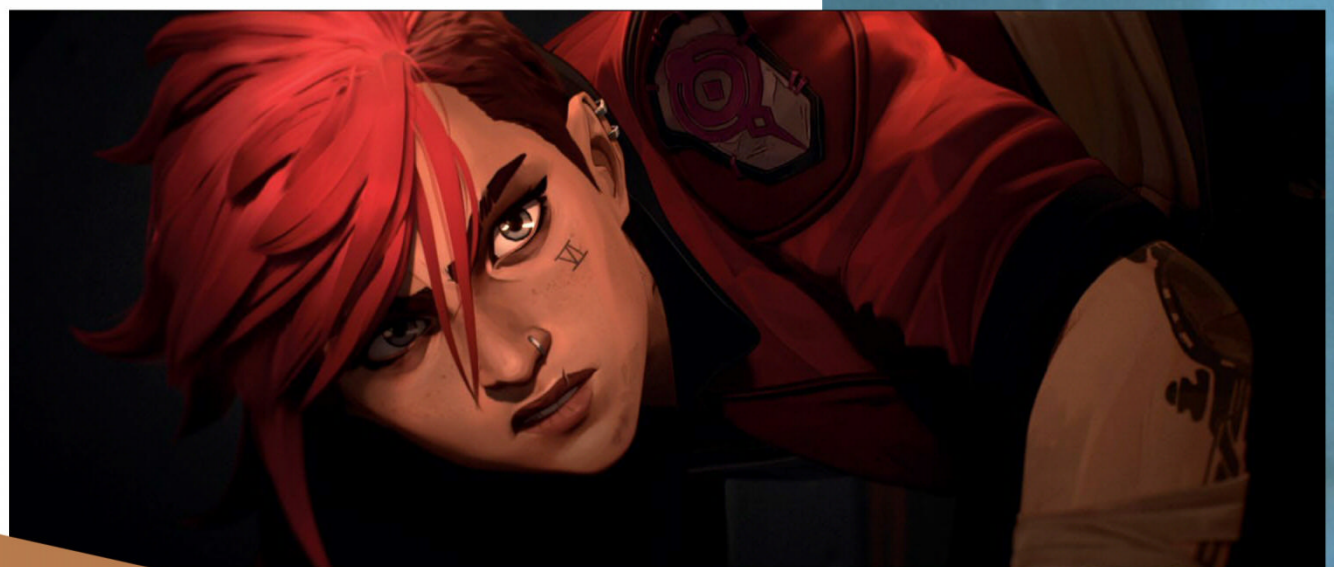
Linke recalls one of the first major challenges was even figuring out what it looks like when *League* champions talk. “In our game, you don’t see animation of them talking, so we didn’t know what their faces would even look like when they talk!” Yee explains. “That was the first animation test that cost, like, 15 grand or so. Let’s take a model, record someone from Riot for a ten-second clip, and let’s just see Vi say

something. And that was the first time that we could even begin to imagine together as a team what this would be like to watch this on the screen.”

Even with Fortiche’s animation expertise, the small Paris-based studio was not equipped for a project this big. Most of its work at that point had been music videos for artists like Gorillaz and other animated shorts. To support a production as big as Arcane, everything had to be built from scratch. “When we did the first tests, I think it was like five people,” Linke says. “At the peak of production it was 300. So when you build the project and the story at the same time as the studio, you just inevitably have

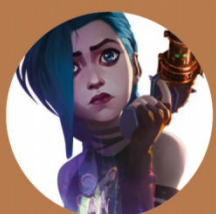
BELOW: Piltover is the glorious city of progress and scientific wonders...

BOTTOM: ...but it oppresses and exploits the people of Zaun, the undercity below its streets.



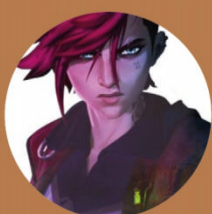
CASTING CALL

Meet some of the League champions featured in Arcane



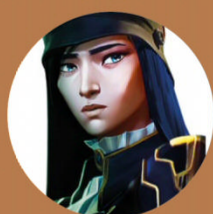
JINX

An undercity inventor desperate to prove herself, but never sure if she’s on the right path.



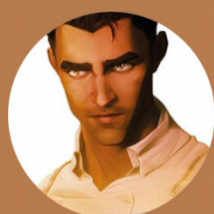
VI

Jinx’s big sister – a fearless bare-knuckle fighter who just wants to protect her undercity family.



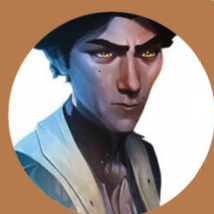
CAITLYN

A stubborn yet intelligent noble who abandons her lineage to join Piltover’s Enforcers.



JAYCE

Ambitious and altruistic to a fault, Jayce is a gifted scientist on the verge of a huge discovery.



VIKTOR

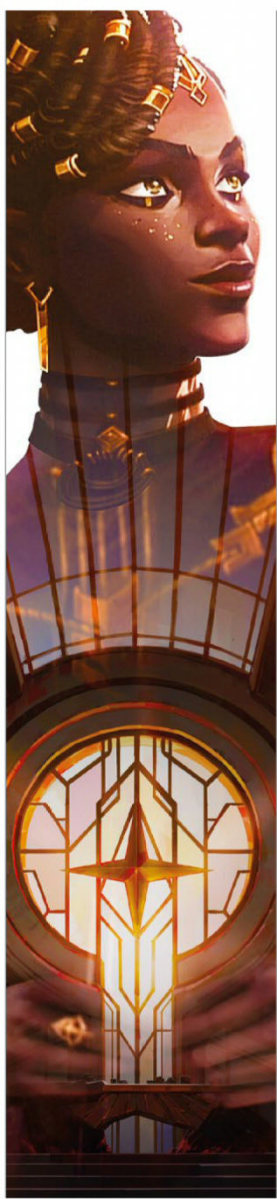
Jayce’s scientific partner, an obsessive pragmatist who won’t let a little red tape hold back progress.

a lot of these experiences where it's like, guess what, you're going to face plant a bunch of times. It was more important for us to be really fast learners rather than having the master plan from the beginning because no matter what the master plan is, it would never survive."

GET JINXED

Scaling a studio to create the most expensive animated TV series in history might've been the biggest challenge Linke and Yee faced, but it was far from the only one. The two also had to figure out how to make *Arcane* accessible to players who never played *League*, and avoid the ancient curse of videogame tie-ins being near-universally poorly received. But one of the biggest problems was just finding the right voice talent.

"It took us three years to cast our Jinx," Linke says. "When we were starting to think about Jinx, we quickly knew that we wanted to find the right voice actress that could hit the loud moments that are Jinx from the game, but also that intimacy that we wanted from someone who definitely wrestled with her demons. I think we were getting close to



giving up when we were looking for [Ella Purnell], and then we just stumbled over her and the pearly gates opened."

As the years ticked by and *Arcane* transformed from hastily scrawled notes in a Google doc to a proof-of-concept pilot episode, those challenges only added up. But Linke says it was their deep familiarity with these characters that helped them stay true to the story and its characters. Linke recalls when Jinx first was released in-game and how players complained that her skin wasn't as pale as her concept art, and how fans had so deeply embraced her subversive, bombastic aesthetic. "I think you just take all these experiences into the process, and over time it paints a much clearer picture for what you're trying to create," he says.

The other thing that kept *Arcane* moving forward was the overwhelming passion of everyone who joined the team to work on it. "It really felt like it was a snowball," Yee says. "One of the greatest fortunes we've had working on this is that it seemed like everyone who joined at different points along the way has seen the passion that everyone else

had poured in and that's what elevated it at every phase."

BREAKING OUT

Looking at the hand-painted, sweeping vistas of Piltover and the neon-drenched trenches of Zaun, it's easy to see *Arcane* as a labour of love. Though I'm keen to see the final three episodes, the first six are nothing short of astonishing – both in the sumptuous character animation and the surprisingly intricate story. Knowing that it's effectively the love child of two Riot developers who had never made a TV show in their life makes me like it even more.

It's also an incredibly well-written series that explores familiar themes of magic and science fiction without dumbing it down to convenient and all-too-common MacGuffins like Marvel's Infinity Stones. But what's most surprising about *Arcane* is how much depth it finds in characters who, years ago, were just mascots; puppets you controlled alongside nine other players. "Our goal with *Arcane* was not so much to show how these characters are champions," Yee says. "We know why they're champions. We wanted to show how they are humans." ■



THE FIRST SIX
EPISODES ARE
NOTHING SHORT
OF ASTONISHING

TUNING IN

RIOT MUSIC hit big with K/DA – but it's not stopping there. *By Jacob Ridley*

If you're a K-pop fan, you might have heard of K/DA. If you're a *League of Legends* fan, you definitely have. That's something of a speciality of Riot Games Music, Riot Games' own music label: its reach extends much further than fandom bops and OSTs – its artists are seriously successful in their own right.

Riot Music was kickstarted by the success of K/DA, the virtual K-pop group formed of *League of Legends* characters and whose 2018 hit POP/STARS has been watched more than 450 million times on YouTube. Before that, Riot tapped into popular music to produce hits for the *League of Legends* World Championship.

Riot's musical theory was founded in a different sound, however, one clad in spiky belts and chains. Back in 2014, metal band Pentakill laid the foundation for K/DA, True Damage, and every Worlds song since. Like K/DA, it's a virtual band, but is often vocalised by real artists.

"Pentakill has always been a passion project of the music team," Toa Dunn, head of Riot Games Musics, says. After a four-year hiatus, Pentakill has returned with an album called III: Lost Chapter and a virtual concert – a chance for Riot to explore Pentakill's virtual band credentials with everything it's

learned since K/DA. "We wanted it to be special for Pentakill fans."

POP UP

Riot has a knack for pop melodies, but it's also managed to pluck its artists' sense of self out of its games in such a way that they're both distinct from one another. Case in point: Pentakill and K/DA are two groups born out of the same game, though you'd never guess it.

"K/DA has shown us the potential behind our music efforts," Dunn explains. "We also think this is just the tip of the iceberg of where we can go from here."

Riot Music's aspirations may be larger than ever, but Dunn states it remains the crossover between games, esports, and even TV/film that holds "great potential for music." No doubt we can expect bigger things out of Riot's music labs in the future, though sadly it won't tell us when K/DA's next single is out. ■



ABOVE: K/DA has a strong social media presence, an odd mix of reality and fantasy

ROLL CALL

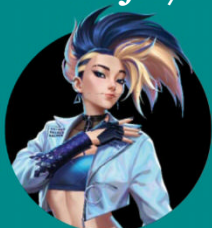
Meet the core members of K/DA



AHRI

Voiced by: Miyeon, Nayeon, Sana, Jihyo, Chaeyoung, Bekuh BOOM, Annika Wells

Fashion icon and face of 'FOXY' cosmetics.



AKALI

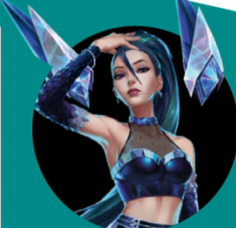
Voiced by: Soyeon
A 'hip hop ninja' from the streets who combines her rapping skills with mixed martial arts.



EVELYNN

Voiced by: Madison Beer, Bea Miller, Kim Petras

This diva had two hit singles before she even joined the group.



KAI'SA

Voiced by: Jaira Burns, Wolftyla, Bekuh BOOM, Aluna

A dedicated dancer who speaks four languages fluently.

"PENTAKILL HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PASSION PROJECT OF THE MUSIC TEAM"

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

VALORANT is out to forge its own path.

By Alistair Jones

Valorant occupies a unique space in Riot Games' catalogue: it's their only title that doesn't follow directly in League of Legends' footsteps. Set in its own sci-fi world rather than the land of Runeterra, it seems under even greater pressure to carve out its own identity.

"LoL is like our big sister at Riot," says creative director David Nottingham. "So obviously when we dream for the future we look at the trajectory and success of League as we think about where we want the game to be 2, 5, 10 years from now.

That doesn't mean we expect to follow the same cadence, but we take inspiration and learnings as we map out and pursue our own path."

Even at this early stage – the game only launched last year – it does seem to be working. Valorant occupies an intriguing space between Overwatch and Counter-Strike, but with a confidence that marks it out as far more than just an imitator.

The game's agents play a big part in its identity. Their hero shooter DNA already makes them far more disruptive than anything the tactical shooter has ever offered, but roster expansions have stretched what feels possible even further; Skye's beastmaster-style skillset or Killjoy's crippling Lockdown ultimate might once have been unthinkable. As heroes, agents and operators bleed ever further into modern shooters, Valorant's diversity might be helping change the face of the FPS forever.

THE STORY SO FAR

That diversity isn't limited to gameplay – it surfaces regularly within Valorant's lore too. Occupying a very different universe to League of

Legends, it's able to draw from Riot's decade of narrative experience to create something that feels well-established from the outset. Every member of its roster oozes personality. Its world, however fractured, feels like part of a cohesive whole. Even the maps themselves offer ever-increasing opportunities to learn about Riot's second universe.

But wouldn't it have been easier to just stick to the setting Riot had already established?

"It was important to us that the world, characters and central conflict of Valorant served the game first and foremost. So we didn't start with an expectation that it should exist in the same universe as League," says Nottingham. "We don't see that as a limitation. In fact we feel it empowers us to always focus on the best way to grow Valorant. At the same time, being Riot, and coexisting alongside an IP as expansive as League, which is 10 years into a journey that Valorant is just beginning, gives us plenty of inspiration."

Who knows – perhaps in a decade's time we'll be celebrating the release of the Valorant TV show. ■





THE SECOND DECADE

After ten years at the top, where does **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** go from here? *By Alistair Jones*

From an outside perspective, *League of Legends* might have seemed as though it's stayed the same for years. Under the hood, however, it remains a hive of activity, with new champions, ideas, and systems changing the way players interact with the game and each other.

In a game as complex as this, however, those kinds of changes rarely go entirely to plan. Last year's item rework, for example, still hasn't been entirely successful. "Overall, we think the item system rework has been positive for the game, though

it's certainly still a work in progress to some extent," says game director Andrei 'Meddler' Van Roon. "The initial launch had some clear benefits, like improved choice structure for some classes, better visualisation of many item effects, and a range of new gameplay mechanics on offer. It also had a number of issues to address."

Riot's working on those issues, with changes set to arrive in this year's Preseason, an annual period between seasons in late autumn that's often defined by new systems. This year, the biggest focus will be on more Elemental Rifts, introducing Hextech and Chemtech variants; the former will provide portals to new

spots on the map, while the latter will automatically stealth anyone who walks into certain areas.

In a game where stealth and mobility are not tools to be handed out lightly, those are significant changes, especially as Riot seems broadly satisfied with the rest of Summoner's Rift, "We're at the point where adding too much more would risk overloading the map with points of interest to contest or consider, so aren't planning any major changes to the base map."

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

While changes to the Rift might be few and far between, new characters are still coming thick and fast. With the latest arrival, *League of Legends*' roster totals 157 playable champions. The pace of new additions is down to a steady stream of half a dozen a year – one for each of the major roles, with an extra one to match the dual specialisation of mid lane's 'mage/assassin' meta.

"We think champion releases are a critical part of what keeps *LoL* feeling like a fresh, evolving game. There's certainly some disruption cost to that, but we think the benefits outweigh the cost." There's no point "in the

TOP: Riot's expanding *LoL*'s elemental rifts ahead of next season.

"WE STARTED EXPLORING LARGER THEMATIC EVENTS THAT CROSS MULTIPLE GAMES"

foreseeable future" where champion releases will halt, but getting launches right has become increasingly tricky, particularly as champion complexity seems to remain on an upward trend.

The last two years have seen the launch of some of the most intricate champions in the game's history, both in terms of how hard they are to understand and how many tools they have at their disposal. Riot says it doesn't think its champions are inherently overloaded, but does plan to scale ideas back, "We're going to be putting more focus on complexity of new champs in 2022, particularly being more critical of designs that feel like they have a tool to respond to every situation too effectively when you play against them."

LORE OF LEGENDS

League of Legends' lore has gathered more and more substance over its lifespan, but until last year, much of that narrative was pretty static. That changed with Spirit Blossom. Leaning on the arrival of champion Yone, the game client became home to an entire fantasy visual novel.

"In the last couple of years, we started exploring larger thematic events that cross multiple games," Meddler says. "We think they've got

an enormous amount of potential."

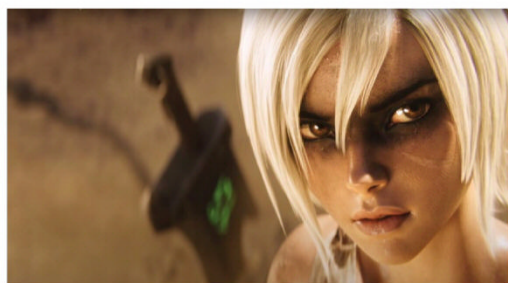
While Riot was "really happy" with the results of Spirit Blossom "our follow-up, The Ruination, was, we feel, a bit more hit and miss". That story, a grand war where champions teamed up with and against the ghostly king Viego, "didn't deliver on expectations around the tone".

Events like these don't seem to be going anywhere. With dozens of alternate realities immediately at hand, "we're really excited to keep working on larger events like this and incorporate learnings from previous ones". Sometimes, *League of Legends* will remain a key focal point of those experiences, but other times "it'll be a supporting piece of the ecosystem", as with the launch of Arcane.

The MOBA landscape has changed a lot since the original launch of *League of Legends*, but so has *LoL* itself. Even as other titles lean on the *LoL* name, however, Meddler suggests that the defining experience will be maintained.

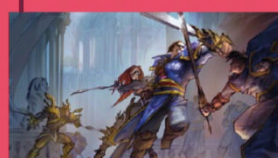
"We certainly want to keep the game evolving, based on meeting the changing needs of our playerbase and similar future players, rather than trying to reinvent *League of Legends* as a whole at the expense of our existing audience. If we think there are opportunities that are very different, but worth pursuing, we're open to that, but as separate experiences like *TFT* or standalone games at Riot, rather than as a replacement for *League of Legends's* core offerings." ■

RIGHT: Spirit Blossom established a brand new mode of in-game storytelling.



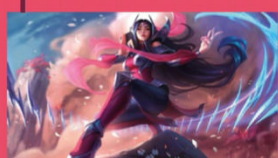
"IT'S JUST YOU AND ME, BOOK!"

A history of League of Legends storytelling



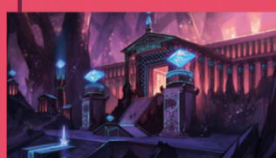
THE JOURNAL OF JUSTICE 2010-2012

In the earliest days of *League of Legends*, lore and worldbuilding was handled via an in-universe newspaper, the Journal of Justice.



IONIA VS NOXUS LORE MATCH 2010

Ionia's victory in this player-driven lore match led to the creation of some themed in-game boots, but had little further impact on *Runeterra*.



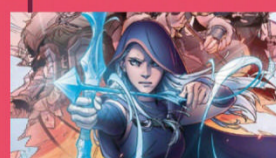
LORE REBOOT 2014

In 2014, Riot revamped the game's lore entirely, reshaping the world and removing the idea of the game being a kind of in-universe political death-sport.



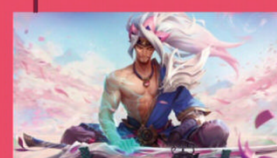
UNIVERSE 2014

That led to the Universe, a compendium allowing players to browse short stories by champion or region, complete with a new, detailed map of *Runeterra* itself.



MARVEL 2020

Riot has partnered with none other than Marvel for a series of comic stories diving into the adventures and backstories of Ashe, Lux, and Zed.



SPIRIT BLOSSOM 2020

Spirit Blossom helped explain the arrival of Yone. While its visual novel-style narrative wasn't strictly canon, it's already shaping the future of *LoL*.

**EACH CARD COMES FROM
ONE OF RUNETERRA'S
GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS**

ON THE CARDS

How **LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA** plans to move past its first design era. *By Alistair Jones*

W

ith competitors ranging from giants like *Hearthstone* to veterans like *Magic: The Gathering*,

Legends of Runeterra had arguably the most difficult job when it came to establishing the world of *League of Legends* within a new genre. How has it been? "Thrilling," according to design director Andrew Yip, "and pretty much what I signed up for. As a developer, it often feels like there is a silent community of developers trying to solve often very different problems, but working separately, arriving at different conclusions. But at the end of the day, *LoR* also provides a unique value to many of its players – an exploration of the *League of Legends* IP."

Legends of Runeterra explores the *LoL* world through its cards, each of which comes from one of Runeterra's geographic regions. The final and most recent of those, Bandle City, launched this summer, but while that might feel like something of an endpoint, "there's also a really exciting opportunity to take a step back and discuss what worked, what didn't, and start to iterate them as a holistic set of regions. In many ways

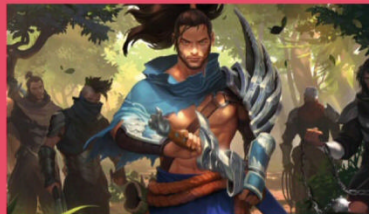
all of the sets leading up to this point were just a first draft of what we thought each region's identity should be." There are also dozens of *League* champions not yet added to the game, many of which don't necessarily fall cleanly into any of those established regions.

RUNESTRUCK

Between new arrivals and new ideas, Yip says *Legends of Runeterra* still offers "a complete ocean of exploration" – including some of those originally brought to life in the game's explorative Labs mode – but as the game continues to grow, at some point Riot will have to address the reality of a growing collection of cards. Eventually, that could mean that old cards will need to be rotated out to make way for new ideas, an idea that Yip says the team is now considering. "Regarding rotation specifically, that's definitely something we're discussing, but no plans have been set in stone quite yet. However, as with everything, we will first take a step back and understand what's best for our community and our game. It would be easy to take 'off the shelf' solutions that so many other games use, but we want to challenge ourselves to see if we can do better." ■

I'LL SCOUT AHEAD!

Legends of Runeterra expands *Runeterra*



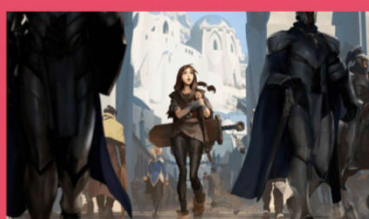
CHAMPIONS

Away from the chaos of Summoner's Rift, the game offers a chance to more fully develop champion's personalities.



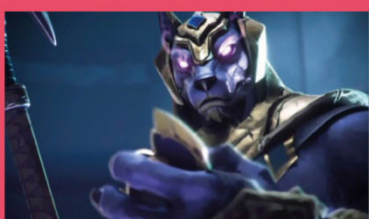
REGIONS

Legends of Runeterra explores each of its ten regions' defining features, from the frozen land of Freljord to the spooky Shadow Isles.



NPCs

The champions might hog the limelight, but *Legends of Runeterra* also brings hundreds of background characters to life.



CINEMATICS

It wouldn't be a Riot game without world-beating cinematics, such as Renekton and Nasus duking it out in the desert.

MOBILE MAGIC

WILD RIFT follows in LoL's footsteps.

By Alistair Jones

Wild Rift was never intended as a like-for-like mobile port of *League of Legends*, but its developers aren't planning to veer too far from the original. "I think *Wild Rift* will be closely intertwined with *League PC*," says game director Alan Moore. "WR embraces the core foundation of 'League the MOBA' and will look to continue to bring that to mobile and console as it evolves."

That could be easier said than done. With 25 champions making their way to the game so far this year, Moore and his team have brought *Wild Rift*'s roster to be nearly half the size of *League of Legends*. That breakneck pace will probably have to slow down in future; while no characters are "entirely off the table", some champions are harder to adapt.

While some of WR's tweaks are so small as to be classed "invisible", larger changes will continue to "drastically alter" the game. Those will be rare, often limited to "annual large scope changes" similar to LoL's own preseason, but could continue to make *Wild Rift* its own unique take on the mobile MOBA. ■



ABOVE: Wild Rift is already catching up on LoL's huge roster



ABOVE: Set six, Gizmos and Gadgets, offers powerful Hextech Augments

FULL AUTO

TEAMFIGHT TACTICS continues to innovate
By Alistair Jones

The autobattler craze erupted from nowhere, and Riot swiftly capitalised. Satisfying that initial flood of interest was one thing, but keeping up with ongoing player demands is another.

Product lead TJ Bours says "new sets will continue to be a way we keep the game as fresh as possible" – the sixth set, Gadgets & Gizmos, has been recently unveiled – but

while alternative and limited time modes are a possibility, "we believe the way TFT will continue to stay the freshest possible is through innovative set design."

System level changes – like the fourth row of tiles between the first and second sets – are something Riot talks about "on occasion," and there are a few ideas "that are on our radar to revisit, but we have no official changes yet". But with new sets as the focus, the question of which champions will make up each rotation is also on players' minds. Bours says they hope to add every LoL champion to *Teamfight Tactics*, "But it's not a goal we are rushing towards. When it makes sense to use a champion in a given set, we will, but not at the cost of quality." ■

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HOW TO BUILD

How videogames recreate gravity, from Newton and platform games to Einstein and the simulation of galaxies.

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

BLACK HOLE

A B L

G

Gravity is one of the simplest and most complicated things in existence. It's both as straightforward as jumping, and a source of cosmic machinations and monsters that defy the imagination. The entity holding you to the ground right now is the same principle of attraction that leads to black holes – exhausted stars that have collapsed under their own mass, growing denser and denser until, at last, they form a vortex so absolute that time deforms and not even light can escape the pull. »

» Videogames have been wrestling with gravity since the

medium's birth, from the geometric landslides of *Tetris* to

the Jenga-esque launch vehicle physics of full-blown 3D

space sims. These games can be a useful means of

visualising equations and phenomena you'd otherwise need a PhD to understand, but most games compromise

with reality out of necessity or simply in the name of fun. They are their own little bespoke universes – and even

those that adhere sternly to the science struggle to portray the ideas put forward in Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity.

UPWARDLY MOBILE

Before we get to Einstein, however, let's talk Mario. Working out how to make a character fall in a platformer is one of game development's bread-and-butter challenges. It sounds simple enough: you subtract a certain vertical distance from the character every frame unless there's something in the way. But getting a leaping character to 'feel' right can take months of work, because everyday gravity is generally more inconvenient than

enjoyable. To make it sing in a videogame, you have to figure out how and when to break the rules.

"If you apply gravity on top of a normal jump, you're going to get this parabola shape," explains Frying Jelly's Eric Stryczek, one of the minds behind the dreamy yet ferocious *99 Fails*. "It's perfect. [But] it actually feels really terrible as a jump. So what Mario did all the way back on the Nintendo Entertainment System was have this sort of extra behaviour – when

you're falling, velocity gets exponential. So you sort of go up, stay in the air for a while, and then you get sucked right back down really quickly."

The equation for how fast objects fall on Earth is minus 9.81 metres per second squared – many third-party game engines like Unity treat this as the rough default for their physics systems. But as Stryczek goes on, "It feels really floaty to have a value like that. Because in platformers, we tend to jump really high. What a lot of beginners get wrong is that they don't mess with this value – you really need to have that snappy feeling."

In *99 Fails*, things are complicated by the protagonist Zeebo's habit of changing shape. "Zeebo has this recurring

nightmare, where he's transforming in weird and

grotesque ways," says Frying Jelly's founder Pawel

Pachniewski. "And each time, there's a different mechanic that the player uses – he'll be a cart, he'll have long legs, he'll be a grasshopper jumping onto broken

pillars, he'll have clones." As such, Frying Jelly sometimes switches off gravity entirely when it wants to add a specific movement trajectory.

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

Expand the playable space to encompass an actual planet, and gravity becomes even more of a riddle. "The definition of down isn't down anymore," says Felipe Falanghe, creator of *Kerbal Space Program*. "You can't just move things towards the bottom of the screen or the horizon, you have to figure out where you are in relation to the planet and apply force towards the centre."

As to how much force you should apply, most developers and astrophysicists follow Isaac Newton's inverse square law of gravity, which dictates that an object's gravity is strong up close and drops off rapidly as you move away, then shallows out. Understanding this formula is key to playing *Kerbal Space Program*, in which you send little green men to visit other planets in a kooky yet unforgiving approximation of our solar system. "It's the thing that makes orbits work," Falanghe says. "If you don't add that orbits will look like... well, they won't look like circles." Indeed, most *Kerbal* spaceflights look like craters.

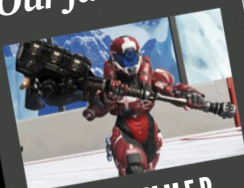
If *Kerbal* sticks to the textbooks on this count, it 'cheats' on other fronts. In particular, it sidesteps the so-called 'n-body' problem, whereby every planetary mass in a group exerts a gravitational pull on every other body simultaneously. "KSP does something that is not entirely realistic which is sometimes called patched conic approximation, which is just a fancy way of saying that we switch gravity sources whenever you get close enough to another one. When you cross into the 'sphere of influence' of the moon, the sources switch, and now you're only affected by gravity from the moon."

Treating gravity as a strictly two-way affair makes for a more stable and predictable simulation, which is vital given that missions in *Kerbal* can take several in-game years. It means that the simulation doesn't have to recalculate gravity 'step by step'; indeed, the game can switch mid-spaceflight to a "deterministic" means of calculating movement without causing discrepancies. "We used to call it the rails system because the spacecraft was on rails, and it basically meant that we could freeze all physics, and just carry things through space." The

**YOU HAVE
TO FIGURE OUT
HOW AND WHEN
TO BREAK
THE RULES**

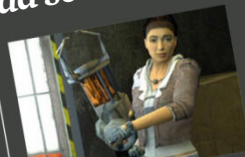
PLAYING WITH GRAVITY

Our favourite mad science tools that put the 'sick' in physics



GRAV HAMMER HALO

Bungie's love letter to any player who's ever flipped a Warthog. An enormous Covenant bludgeoning hammer capable of walloping entire barricades into freefall.



GRAVITY GUN HALF-LIFE 2

The weapon that launched a thousand seesaw puzzles. Also handy for shooting chairs and sawblades at things you'd rather not waste your regular ammo on.



PROBE LAUNCHER OUTER WILDS

Fire it at the skyline and watch the probe curve according to the planet's mass. Then tap the shutter to produce a stop motion video.



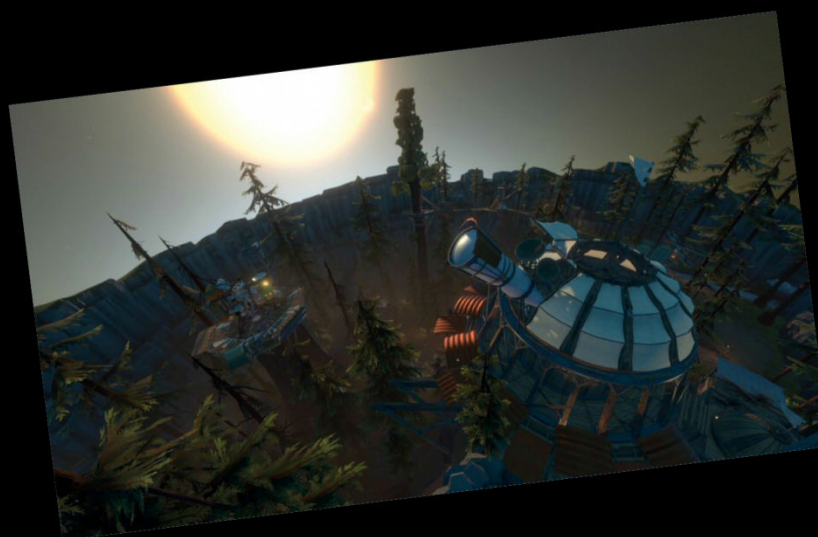
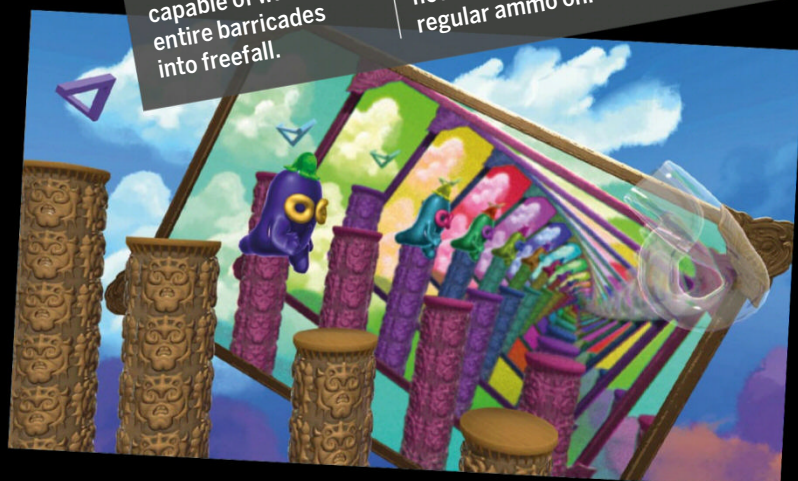
SINGULARITY MASS EFFECT

Rudely pops open a mini black hole that scoops up nearby enemies and whirls them around like pillows at a sleepover till you put them out of their misery.



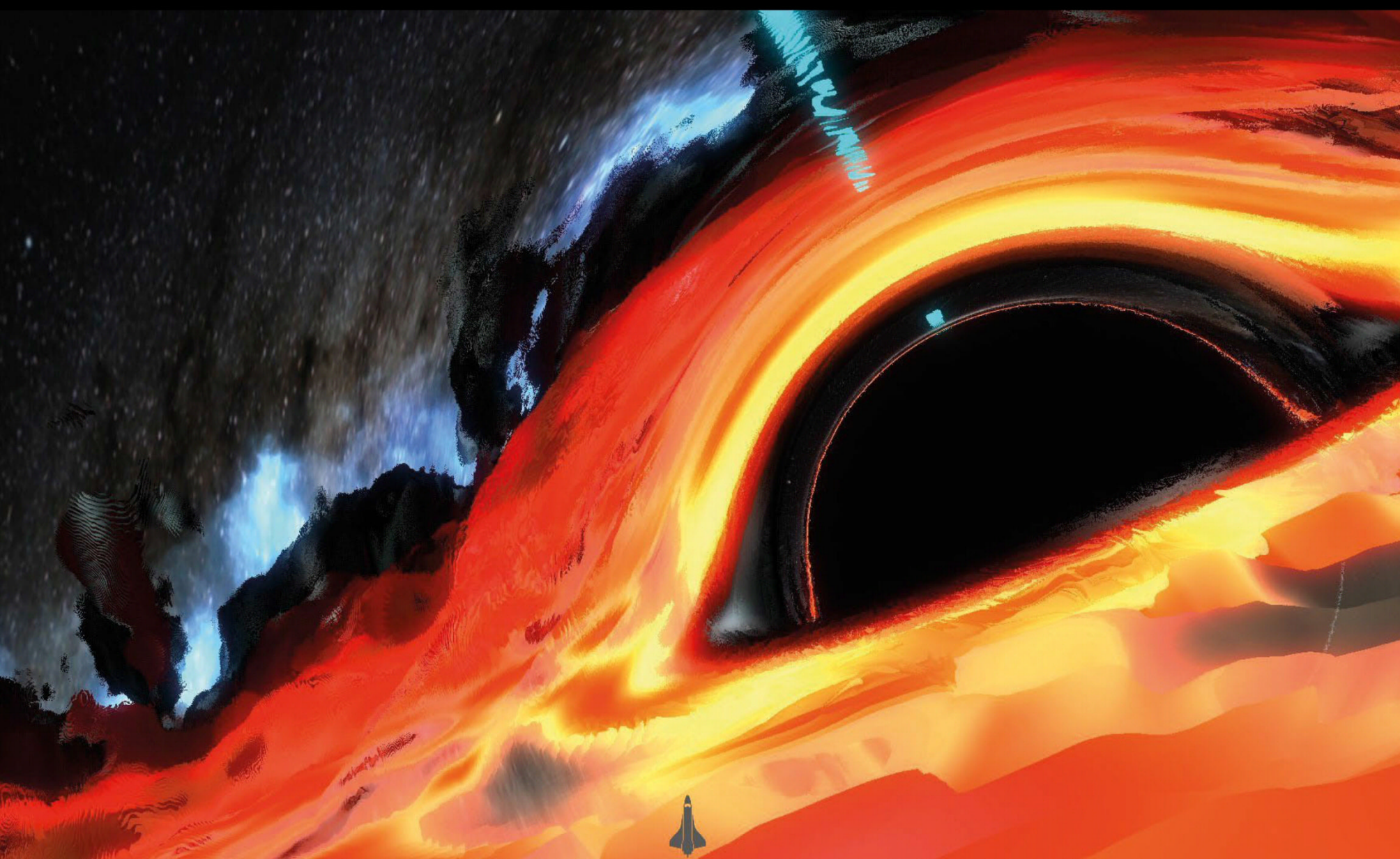
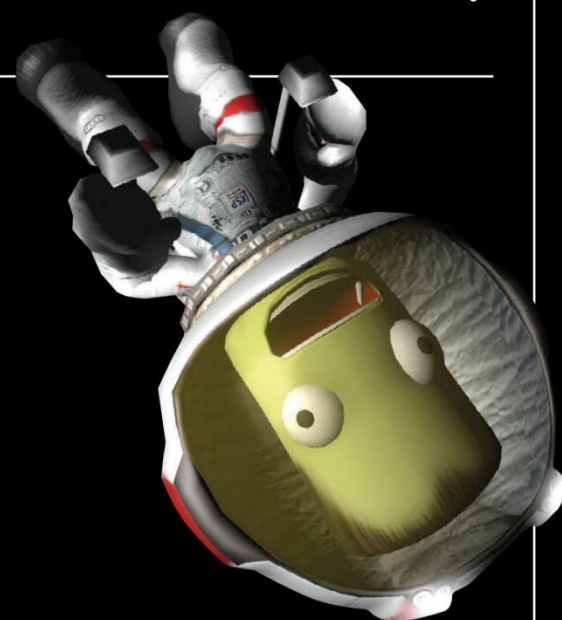
KAT GRAVITY RUSH

In a nutshell, you get to decide which direction is down. This ability only covers a small area around you – best not to activate it in a crowd.



FAR LEFT: 99 Falls shows how even jumping can be a headache to design.

BELOW: Guojun Pan's Black Hole Simulator is a celebration of gravity's 'symmetry'.

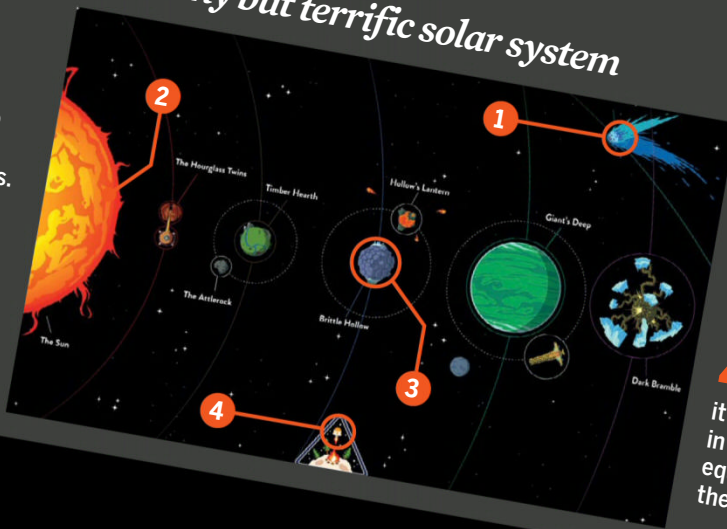


OUTER SPACE

Exploring Outer Wilds' tiny but terrific solar system

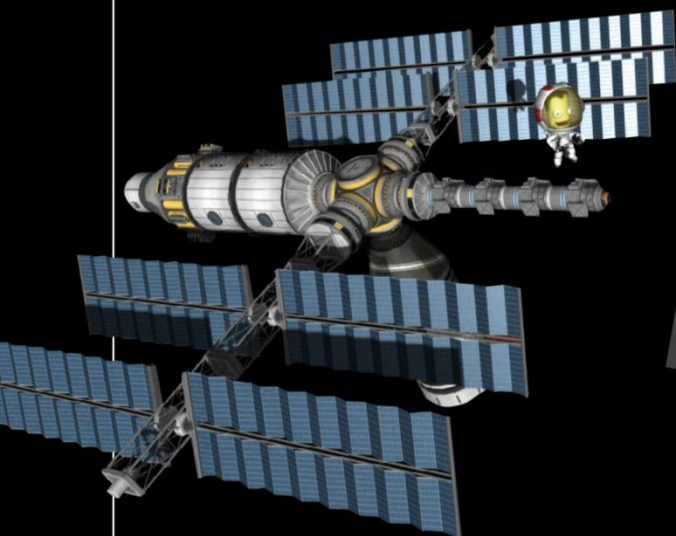
1 Your ship may get pulled away by the gravity of Giant's Deep while parked on the Interloper comet, whose elliptical orbit creates varying terrain conditions.

2 Newton's inverse square law applies on the Sun Station – the star pulls on the player's mass differently to the facility itself, making for one extra-perilous leap of faith.



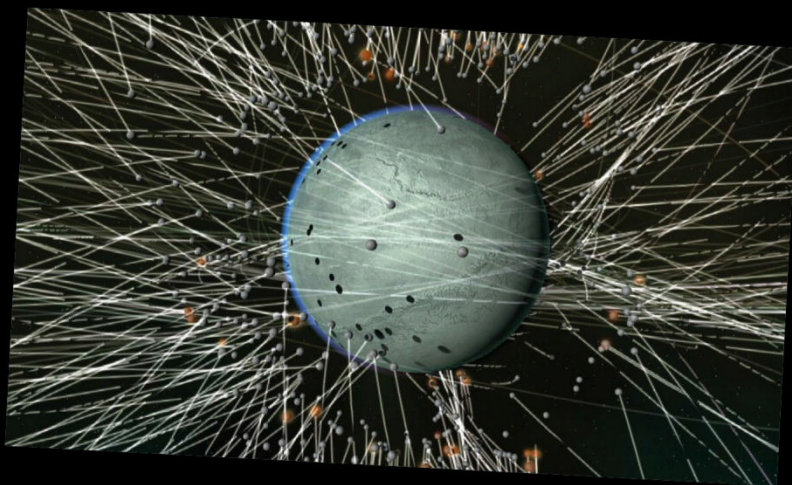
3 Early in development, Brittle Hollow had a molten core rather than a subterranean black hole, with pieces fired into space by geysers rather than sucked in.

4 Your ship's artificial gravity risks spinning it around when you stand in it, so Mobius applies equal force on the ship in the opposite direction.



RIGHT: Universe Sandbox 2's whimsical 'choreographies' let you arrange planets in unlikely patterns.

FAR RIGHT: Gravity is Kerbal's "main character or at least, villain", says its creator.



» trade-off is that *Kerbal* can't simulate certain fancier

astrophysical 'terrain variables', such as Lagrangian points

– tactically advantageous locations in space between masses, where the pull from each mass is equal.

SUM OF ALL SPHERES

Mobius Digital's planet-hopping timeloop adventure

Outer Wilds is similarly selective in its simulation. For one thing, Newton's inverse square law only applies to one

mass – the sun. The reason is simply that *Outer Wilds*' solar system is tiny, with planets the size of islands separated by tens of kilometres – as such, the pull of gravity drops away too quickly. "Early on, I tried the inverse square law on planets," says Alex Beachum, creative director. "But because they're so small, it just becomes too easy to achieve escape velocity – it doesn't feel right." Instead, gravity decreases in a more 'linear' fashion, and the developer can set alignment fields so that players orient towards masses automatically.

Outer Wilds also exercises a bit of licence with regard to interactions between planets, adds tech artist and programmer Logan Ver Hoef. "We have this sphere of influence for the sun and we've got spheres of influence for each planet. But because planets end up passing so close by each other, if they actually affected each other at that scale, they'd form these wild patterns and probably just escape orbit." The game's equivalent of our Moon, the Attlerock, responds only to the gravity of one planet, but with extra acceleration dolloped on top to reflect that planet's orbit – otherwise, says Beachum, the Attlerock might be left behind or dragged into the sun.

Elsewhere, however, the simulation is more stringent. Your spacecraft may tumble off the back of a comet when it nears the sun, for example, because in keeping with Newton's law, the star's gravity acts differently on the ship's mass versus the comet. Moments like these were often discovered during play, and left in for kicks. For all its resemblance to a cosmic stage production, with planets shape-shifting on schedule, *Outer Wilds* is on some level a 'pure simulation' with plenty of potential for chaos.

It's possible to wreak havoc simply by venturing too far. "If you disable autopilot and fly away from the solar system, and open your star map, everything's lost its mind," Beachum says. "Because floating point errors build up, and the planets are too far away. You can actually break the simulation if you try hard enough, because they're not on rails." The game's 22 minute timeloop was introduced partly as a kind of safety valve. "We wanted the solar system to change in ways that aren't easily

reversible, like Brittle Hollow falling apart, and having

everything reset is an easy way to handle that," Ver Hoef

says. "But also, the 20-ish minute mark was originally our limit for stability."

PLAYING WITH STARS

Way out at the deep end of videogame simulations of gravity is Giant Army's *Universe Sandbox 2*. Created initially by Dan Dixon, who wrote his first gravity simulator in high school, it's been in development for ten years and has swollen to the point that the current iteration can recreate the motions of entire galaxies, each with its central supermassive black hole.

Unlike *Outer Wilds* and *Kerbal*, *Universe Sandbox 2* is a 'true' n-body physics simulation. It calculates the effects of hundreds of bodies on each other's movements, though it economises in places by, for instance, treating close-knit asteroids as a single mass. "It can become very, very slow," Dixon acknowledges. "But in many ways, gravity is the simplest thing we do now."

Giant Army has even looked at recreating dark matter, the mysterious and invisible substance that fills our universe, adding to its gravity and keeping apparently 'underweight' galaxies in shape. "Part of the problem with dark matter is that it doesn't really come in chunks," says Erika Nesvold, Giant Army's in-house astrophysicist. "There was a theory that it was big, compact objects, but it seems more likely now that it's sort of spread throughout a galaxy. And that's just really hard to handle in an n-body simulation. And it's also hard, of course, to show dark matter to a user. But we'd love to get back into it someday."

As a sim with no objectives besides meddling with the cosmos, *Universe Sandbox 2* doesn't have to worry as much about the design and playability pressures that shape gravity in *Kerbal* and *Outer Wilds*. But in adopting n-body physics, it has to wrangle with the question of mounting errors dependent on the speed at which the simulation progresses.

The bigger the 'step' between each set of n-body calculations, the less precise things become. "As a rule of thumb, picking a time step that's bigger than the time it takes something to orbit in a circle is a bad idea," Nesvold says. The game performs additional 'sub-step' calculations for finesse in the event of objects making sharp turns, but "there's only so many you can do". Increase the time

**OUTER WILDS
IS ON
SOME LEVEL
A 'PURE
SIMULATION'**

» interval too much, and whole star systems may disappear.

“Some users thought, ‘Oh, in the future, everything’s gonna fly away from the sun,’” says Dixon. “No, no, no, what’s happened is you sped up time so much that it’s become inaccurate, which is [a problem] inherent to simulations.”

DISTANT RELATIVES

While *Outer Wilds*, *Kerbal* and *Universe Sandbox 2* are fundamentally grounded in ‘classical’ Newtonian physics, their creators have all flirted with the more recent, and transformative theories of gravity introduced by Albert Einstein. To crudely summarise their differences, Newton’s physics holds that space is full of masses and forces act on them in linear time. According to Einstein, however, space and time are actually a single, fluctuating entity – a ‘spacetime’ which is woven together and distorted by mass, and this distortion is what we call gravity.

Einstein’s theory dictates that planets and stars don’t just reel in other masses, but ‘dilate’ time nearby relative to the passage of time for an observer further afield. This

obliges a fascinating, but not very intuitive rethinking of the act of falling. “The idea is that it’s not a force pulling you down, it’s the future leading you towards the ground,” Falanghe explains. “Spacetime bends, so that when your straight-line trajectory turns towards the ground it’s not just space that bends but time. The future bends your trajectory.”

As fascinated as he is by this prospect, Falanghe decided early on not to apply Einsteinian physics to *Kerbal Space Program*, partly because

the ramifications are negligible at solar system scale, and partly because time dilation is tricky to portray in a management game where solid scheduling is key. “In *Kerbal*, we have the orbit map that shows your trajectory, and you can plan manoeuvres and see how your trajectory would intersect with another celestial body, turn around and things like that. But if you said, ‘Oh, by the way, your ship clock will desynchronise with your home clock by like, 0.2 seconds, by the time you get here,’ that’s much harder to communicate to the player.”

Giant Army has thought more earnestly about introducing relativistic effects. As Nesvold and Dixon point out, these can be observed ‘close at hand’ in the

elusive behaviour of Mercury, which orbits close enough

to our sun to experience time dilation from its mass. The

problem is that simulating general relativity requires the player to actually be relative to things – to occupy a

vantage point *within* the universe, so as to, for example, witness the effects of gravity on light. This would somewhat interfere with the usual running of a god sim.

“If you deleted the sun, it would take a certain amount of time for it to disappear off your screen.”

HEART OF DARKNESS

Both *Kerbal* and *Universe Sandbox 2* are checked from exploring Einstein because they’re born of genres that are steeped in concepts from Newton. Thanks to its sci-fi story, *Outer Wilds* is able to forge a little further. It hints at relativistic effects in the form of alien time travel experiments, connected to a miniature black hole that lurks beneath the crust of one unfortunate planet. During the game’s alpha, Mobius also added an island area that turned time dilation into a performance issue. “When you got close to this antenna, I just made the framerate

worse,” Beachum reflects. “But it was really bad, and if anything, I think it should have been the reverse. It should have been that everything around you speeds up.”

The aforesaid black hole distorts light believably – it recreates the deflection of photons by gravitational lensing, though as Ver Hoef acknowledges, “It’s super fudged – [an actual photon] would follow a curved path and ours just go: boink!” But there’s no time dilation, and as with the sun and planets, the object’s gravity is carefully contained. “A black hole the size of Brittle Hollow should have a distortion radius larger than our real-world solar system.”

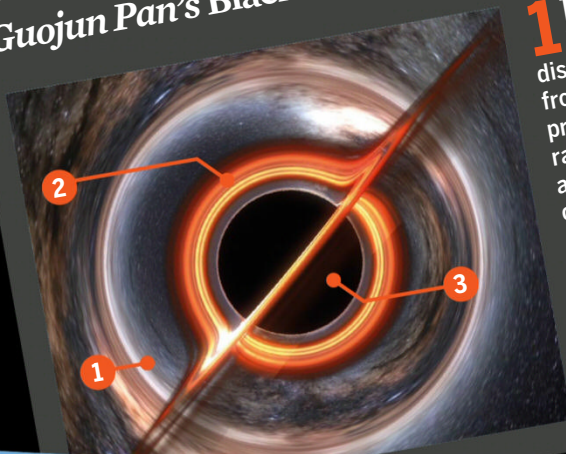
It’s easy to forget amid talk of refraction and dilation that what motivates all these projects is a sense of wonder – not just at the operations of gravity, but at the mingled elegance and eccentricity of the models describing it. “You have simple formulas and equations that give you this approximation of the universe,” enthuses Falanghe. Among Giant Army’s goals is teaching players to embrace the imperfections of sims at large – from videogames to the supercomputer-powered, yet no less flawed models used by NASA.

As Dixon concludes, “What a cool way to be able to learn about the amazing reality that we find ourselves in, and that the universe is weirder than anyone ever imagined.” It remains difficult to conceive of a gravity sim wholly based around Einstein’s theories, but if the above projects are any indication, it’s only a matter of time before somebody takes the plunge. ■

SPACE AND
TIME ARE
ACTUALLY A
SINGLE,
FLUCTUATING ENTITY

ANATOMY OF A BLACK HOLE

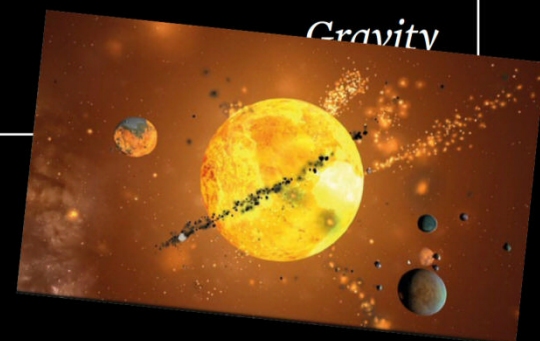
Guojun Pan's Black Hole Simulator allows us to get up close and personal



1 THE HALO Black holes distort light coming from behind them, producing a banded radiance surrounding an impermeable circle – a phenomenon known as gravitational lensing, which allows astronomers to detect objects that don't give off light themselves.

2 THE EVENT HORIZON A theoretical boundary beyond which gravity is so strong that light can't escape. A ship falling towards the event horizon will appear to slow down rather than crossing it, because events within the horizon can't affect an external observer.

3 THE SINGULARITY The ultimate oblivion, where spacetime curves beyond reckoning. An infinitely dense, infinitely small region that is simultaneously predicted by and in breach of our current theories of gravity. 'Where' and 'when' are empty sounds.



LEFT: Felipe Falanghe's upcoming *Balsa Model Flight Sim* trades *Kerbal's* orbits for complex wind physics.

BELOW: *Outer Wilds* includes matter-emitting white holes – a purely hypothetical phenomenon.



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REVIEW

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Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

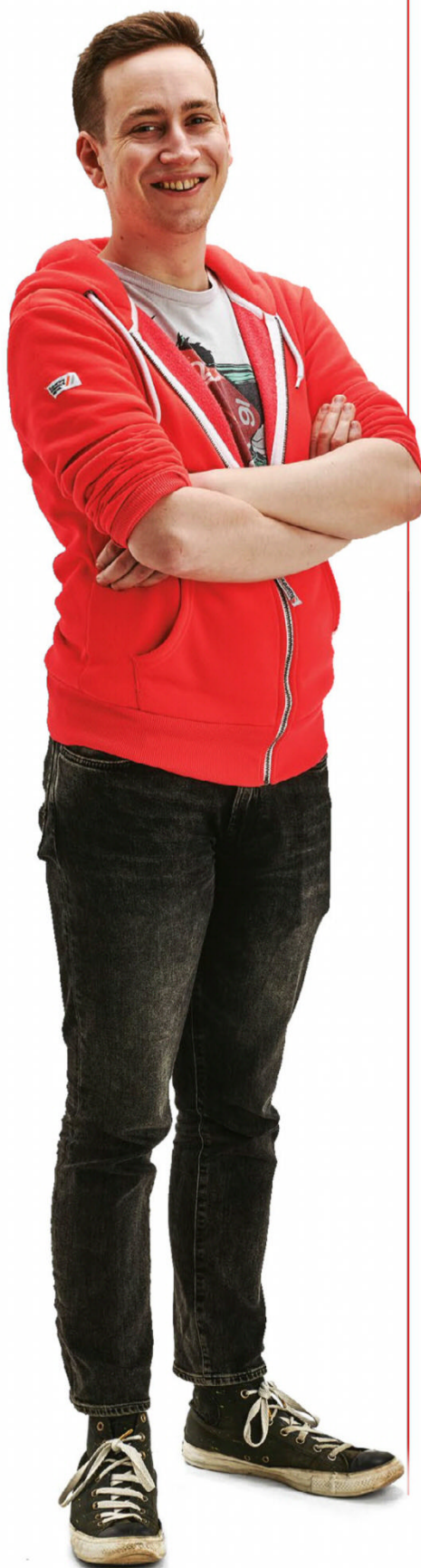
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Looking back

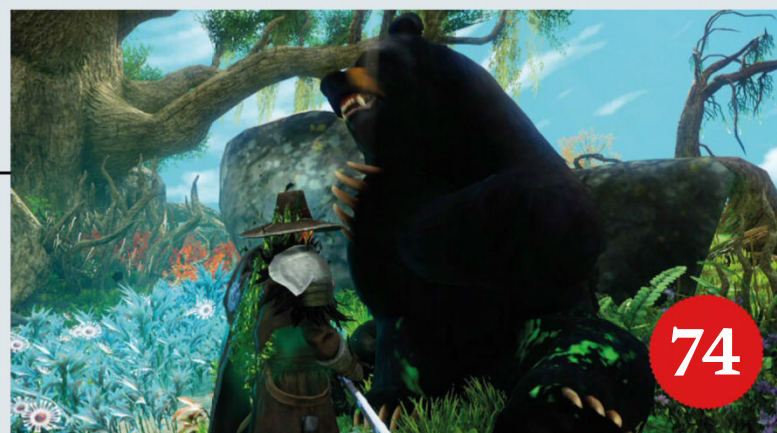
Have you actually played many new games this year? A bit of contemplating today made me realise that, despite my job, I've spent far more of my time in 2021 jumping back into old favourites, or catching up on past titles I missed first time around, than I have keeping up with the latest releases. It's not normal, for me – I usually try to stay in step with the zeitgeist, and I'm easily distracted by new and shiny things. It makes me wonder if it's the pandemic's fault – has all that background anxiety and isolation pushed me towards known quantities over unfamiliar experiences? Or am I just blaming all my personal failings on the pandemic, like I do when people ask me why I haven't tidied my flat or gotten a haircut in two years? If you've experienced the same, tweet me in solidarity – maybe we can form a support group.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's revolutionary reviewers...



LAUREN AITKEN
Specialist in
Guerilla journalism
Currently playing
Far Cry 6
This month
Joined PCG, only to get
thrown in at the deep
end with a four page
open-world review.



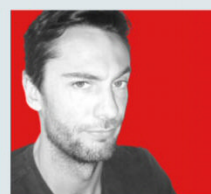
FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Masochism
Currently playing
New World
This month
Destroyed body and
soul to reach endgame
so he could tell you it's
kind of not great.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Crashing spaceships
Currently playing
Jett: The Far Shore
This month
Explored a bizarre
alien world. Good prep
for entering the world
of print full-time.



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Writing 4 money
Currently playing
Back 4 Blood
This month
Got zombie guts all
over his deck of cards.
Devs need to stop
mixing genres.



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Perfect... timing
Currently playing
Lemnis Gate
This month
Discovered you can
activate the Butterfly
Effect with a gun that
shoots poison.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Lethal lamination
Currently playing
Vespiary
This month
Explored the offensive
potential of a thrown
ID card. Not high, it
turns out.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Digging it
Currently playing
Shovel Knight: Treasure Trove
This month
Called a spade a
spade, but with some
flowery adjectives.

GUERRILLA RADIO

FAR CRY 6 demonstrates why the series needs a revolution of its own

By Lauren Aitken

The fictional island of Yara is as beautiful as it is predictable. There are sunny beaches, friendly locals serving street food you're for some reason not allowed to buy, and sharks in the water that want to take a bite out of you. The music you hear blasting from homes and cars is upbeat, there's constantly a party vibe in the air, and there are wild horses you can actually ride.

That's where Yara's uniqueness ends and an uneasy sense of parody begins, for me. While Ubisoft is determined to make Giancarlo Esposito's despot, Antón Castillo, feel like a real and credible threat, he's more of a satirical mash-up of Franco and Castro. He's definitely a bad guy, with a vision for his country that he holds above all – even family, as he often reminds his son and protégé, Diego – but there's a two-dimensional vibe I just can't shake. We'll have to come back to him later.

CURSE OR CURE?

Far Cry 6 is a quintessential *Far Cry* game. You begin as an underdog who quickly ends up with the moniker of hero, fleeing some tyrannical bastard who's wrecking the lives of the locals to make his dream a reality. In this case, he's made a smokable cancer

cure, Viviro. Viviro is farmed and produced by slaves from Yara. Castillo labels them as 'outcasts' and 'fake Yarans', setting the us-and-them tone in the game's opening sequence. Much like its predecessors, you can

You begin as an underdog who ends up with the moniker of hero

grapple your way up cliffs and buildings – truly revolutionary stuff, I know – use your phone to track enemies and their weaknesses and, for the first time, simply holster your weapon so you don't look super sus running

around with a sniper rifle. Ubisoft has borrowed the cloaked mechanic from *Assassin's Creed* in the sense that as long as you and your holstered weapon don't stand too close to guards or act in a suspicious way, you can pass through checkpoints with no violence. It also works as a stealth mechanic, where you can saunter up to a vehicle, quickly whip your pistol out and

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**
Open world action FPS set on the fictional Caribbean island of Yara
- EXPECT TO PAY**
£50
- DEVELOPER**
Ubisoft
- PUBLISHER**
In-house
- REVIEWED ON**
Intel i7-9700F, RTX 2070 Super, 32Gb RAM installed on SSD
- MULTIPLAYER**
Yes
- LINK**
ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/far-cry/far-cry-6

assassinate the driver before stealing a prison truck. You'll also want to destroy anti-aircraft guns when you find them, otherwise, you won't be able to fly around Yara – or progress the story in some sections. There are still the usual animal hunting missions, too, and new Criptograma Chests that lead to unique gear.

Much like *Far Cry 5*, you can choose whether you want to play as a female or male Dani Rojas, though you can't customise their appearance – not unless you get the same bug I did after using the photo mode, where Dani was stuck with an unfortunate wink/cheeky tongue out combo in cutscenes for an hour or so. Dani is an orphan who was previously conscripted into Yara's military, so is familiar with the people fighting for El Presidente and country – and that not all of them are bad guys. She begins as many underdogs do: unaware of what she truly believes in. As she comes to understand the plight of the people and Diego's suffering at the hands of his father, we see her alliances shift and her core beliefs strengthen. Family – whether through blood or friendship – is a core theme in *Far Cry 6*, and one Dani struggles to reconcile given her history.

In the first few hours of *Far Cry 6*, you'll hear the word 'guerrilla' more times than you'll ever be able to count. Juan Carlos, a veteran guerrilla, will school you on his guerrilla rules on how to be a guerrilla and succeed in all the guerrilla warfare. It's repetitive, yes, and typical of how the game treats its revolutionaries as caricatures, but he does at least give you one major game changer: the Supremo.

The Supremo is like an ugly back bling that brings way too much power to a fight. You can combo it with a weapon to inflict terrible damage on your opponents as you see fit. You'll begin with a flamethrower and rocket launcher combo that's just as stupid and OP as it sounds. My

DOGS ARE A GUERRILLA'S BEST FRIEND

Three of *Far Cry 6's* best Amigos



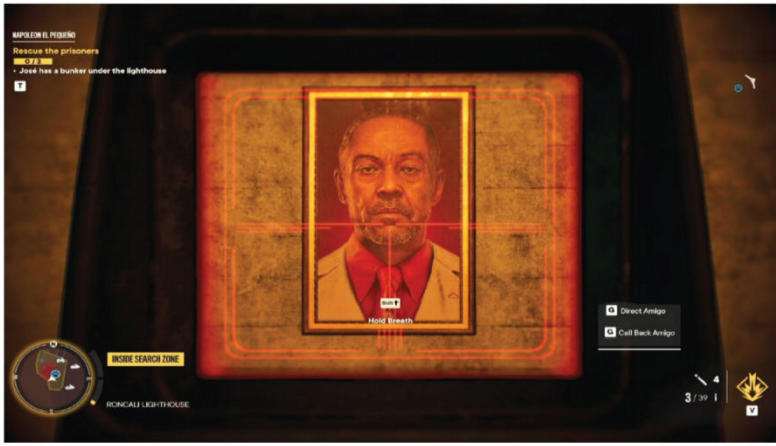
K-9000
You might recognise this lad from *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*. He receives less bullet damage and has immunity to poison and fire, which you will deal with a lot in Yara.



CHORIZO
For the stealth players among you, this lil pup on wheels will distract the guards so you can sneak past or, you know, rush them from behind and slit their throats.



CHAMPAGNE
As deadly as she is beautiful, she takes a leaf out of Meowth's book and gathers more Pesos for you from dead enemies after she's mauled them to death.



ABOVE: Hay un amigo en mí...

LEFT: Know your enemies.



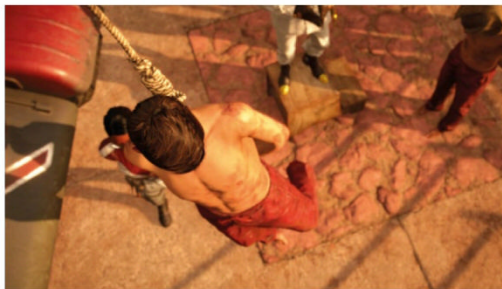
WHYYYYYYYY?



ABOVE: Dani, please be serious.



RIGHT: Please meet the travel rep at 8am...



A definitely not evil jungle fortress.



Taking in the sunset with an enormous gun.

» advice? Pair it with the flame retardant gloves – much like in *Far Cry 5*, the entire environment can catch fire and I spent way too long dying in the blaze. Later on, you'll unlock another Supremo that unleashes an EMP attack that can take out security systems and vehicles. When you're being pursued by cars, trucks and helicopters, you can see why this would come in handy.

There are other silly yet effective weapons available in-game, too, like the CD Launcher that questionably blasts the Macarena. Overall, the combat is as good as it's ever been. You can sneak your way around and take out enemies with melee kills or headshots, or go in all guns and Supremos blazing. You can modify weapons at workbenches, adding better sights, suppressors, and ammo types into the mix, as well as change their appearance and add little charms. There's also the season pass' *Blood Dragon* gear which is hilariously out of place in Yara, complete with the Kobracon sniper rifle and an actual robotic dog called (of course) K-9000.

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

Speaking of amigos, there are no humans who will follow you around in *Far Cry 6*, but you will meet a healthy bunch of animal compadres. There's the loveable Chorizo, a little dachshund in a wheelchair who will distract enemies, allowing you to sneak past. And yes, all of my guns have little Chorizo bone charms, thanks for asking. There's also Chicharrón the feisty rooster and Guapo the crocodile, who will both

mess up your enemies – as opposed to just letting you know there might be a gun nearby. Amigos are effective in the field and add a welcome bit of comic relief to fights. It really is something to be headshotting enemies then turning around to see a tiny dog biting a guy in the face.

As I said earlier, you can also find and ride horses now, and are able to pet and feed all manner of wildlife around Yara. Though as of yet, I have not found a single cat in Yara – if anyone finds one, point me to it. If riding horses isn't your jam, you can fly helicopters, drive a range of land and sea

vehicles, and even fly a plane. I crash my planes within seconds – I am not destined to become a pilot – but it's still fun to tour Yara from above and imagine you're going on a nice Caribbean holiday after nearly two years of living through hell.

Whether I am just bad at games or the controls are a bit janky is up for debate. The vehicles feel pretty terrible to drive – they don't turn left or right enough when steering, and it feels like your viewpoint isn't centred enough, as if your head was poking out the window a little. Every vehicle and horse feels way too fast, even with the sensitivity turned down.

Playing on a 2070 Super, I experienced a few crashes and bugs, too, such as that weird face glitch and a few floating NPCs. For whatever reason, the whites of the eyes around each character's iris wouldn't stay a solid colour, either, so unless every character was intended to be on drugs, something was amiss there.

There are also a few weird sections in camps that have you

playing in third-person. It's like in *Mass Effect* where you can't jump – instead, you're just stumbling around with this giant, deadly backpack thing and tripping over dogs, roosters, and junk. Speaking of the camps, there are new Los Bandidos missions where you can send a Yaran Leader to complete separate missions – sort of like how *Dragon Age Inquisition's* war table missions work. You can assign a leader to a mission, then after a set amount of time, you'll be able to choose what method they use to complete it, depending on the leader's perks. It wasn't very clear how it or the co-op mode contribute to the story bar collecting more resources and Pesos, but they're a nice enough distraction.

It wouldn't be a *Far Cry* game without a few twists, though I'll leave this review spoiler-free. Betrayal is at the heart of *Far Cry 6*, from Castillo's deception to the world about how Viviro is grown and manufactured, to the grievances within the guerrillas and Dani's own relationship with the regime. A lot of the betrayal is predictable – this isn't my first *Far Cry* rodeo, after all – but there are enough surprises to keep you happy. It's difficult to separate Esposito's Gus Fring from Castillo – both are very charming, two-faced, and, ultimately, grade-A bastards – which, depending on whether you enjoyed *Breaking Bad* or not, will make his character more or less appealing.

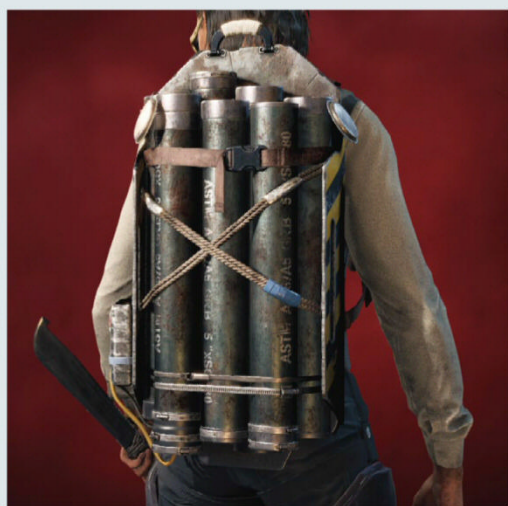
There's less pomp and exaggeration with this villain compared to *Far Cry 5's* Joseph Seed; Castillo is just as committed to his cause, but he's much more traditional and realistic due to his seat of power. He shines an uneasy light on potential goings-on in the world – the 'politics' that Ubisoft seems keen to distance itself from – highlighting that all the 'good' things we receive might be the results of modern-day atrocities. There's little to laugh at with *Far Cry 6's* story, instead leaving a sour taste as you wonder about reality and the state of the world. And for that, I definitely recommend you play it. Well, that and there's like a million wee dogs you can pat. ■

SUPREMO!

Here's how the new superweapon works

1 DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Choose what kind of Supremo you want. Do you want to launch rockets from your big backpack, or knock helicopters out of the sky with an EMP blast?

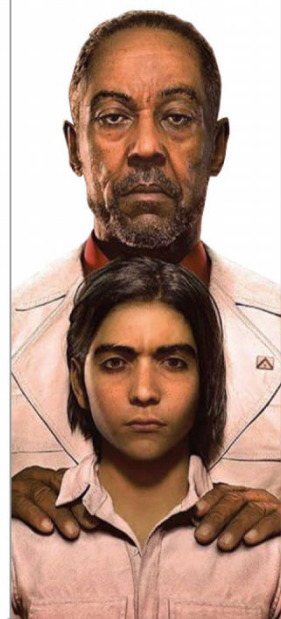


2 URANIUM FEVER

Collect depleted uranium from anti-aircraft gun sites so that Juan can upgrade your deadly accessory.

3 PROFIT

Make sure you choose a weapon to go with that Supremo. Who wouldn't want a flamethrower and rocket launcher combo?



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Yara is super lush and wonderful to explore, but unfortunately it's all a little too familiar – both in gameplay and story.

75

FIRE WALK

BONFIRE PEAKS leaves plenty to think about – and to burn

By Ruth Cassidy

As I sat in the snow at the peak of *Bonfire Peaks*, I'd reached the final part of my journey: by failing to complete the game. I'd been on a beautiful journey of puzzles so damn tricky that I, too, wanted to pack it all up and go into the woods, but it ended here. Whatever closure the main character was looking for by burning all his belongings, he wouldn't quite find it, and neither would I.

The setup is simple. Our unnamed protagonist has left for the woods to burn all his possessions, and it's your job to push, drop, or slide the crates of his belongings into a fire. In this block-y, voxel world, you can only move forward, backwards, or pivot on the spot. Any block you're holding will swing round as you turn too, so space is key. Early puzzles set the stage simply on how to navigate and manipulate that space – like how to be sure to climb stairs backwards, so you don't brick yourself in.

As *Bonfire Peaks* progresses, it introduces new elements – longer bricks, conveyor-belt like streams, and Indiana Jones-esque pressure traps among them. Unlike the smooth onboarding at the start of the game, the introduction of these complicated puzzle elements can feel disruptive.

BUILDING BRIDGES

With the long bricks, for instance, I first met them in the overworld as a bridge. So in the puzzle that immediately followed, I built on that idea, and tried to configure a bridge between myself and my crate-of-stuff. It didn't quite reach, so I tried repeated, different configurations of bridge. All of them failed, until I eventually realised I needed to use the bricks to push the crate, instead.

It might seem obvious to try another tactic, but the puzzles in *Bonfire Peaks* are tricky. They're full-on headscratchers, and failing a few times is a necessary part of troubleshooting your way through to the correct approach. So building a

rubbish bridge didn't immediately signify that I wasn't supposed to be building a different, better bridge – I just thought my bridge was bad.

As you climb through the forested overworld, you encounter remnants of the life you're presumably leaving behind. The big calculator and chunky TV say 'I'm burning all my belongings to escape to nature', but other elements suggest

something more tragic may have happened. The distribution of large, obvious symbols to suggest a story feels more on the nose than it does

Other elements suggest something tragic may have happened

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sokoban puzzler where you burn crates of your belongings in a voxel-styled forest

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Corey Martin

PUBLISHER
Draknek & Friends

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i5-8300H, 8GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1050

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bonfirepeaks.com

sentimental, however. Paired with more random assets – including a baffling pile of sliced watermelon at the emotional climax of the game – and the effect feels distracting.

PEAK TIME

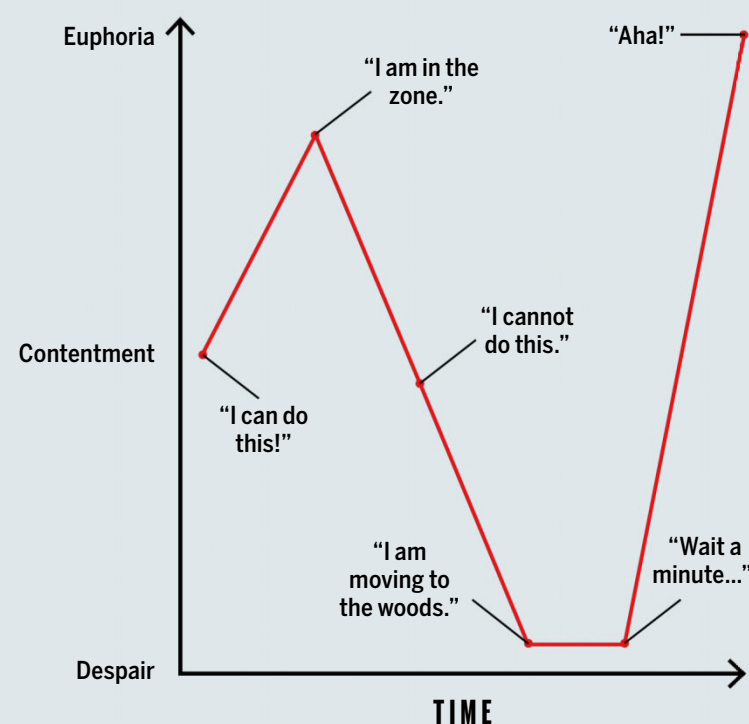
Bonfire Peaks' care to neither frustrate nor condescend contributes to its meditative feel. You only need to complete a few puzzles per zone to progress. It's a quick tap of a button to undo a careless mistake – or to capitalise on one that triggers an 'aha' moment – and you can undo your way all the way back to the beginning of the puzzle, if you so choose. It's a careful balance to keep you in your element.

This consideration backfired for me, however. I increasingly found that there was some foundational part of the puzzle's logic I didn't get. There were zones where I set a significant number of puzzles aside because I couldn't even find ways to experiment, let alone divine a solution. So when I reached the climax of the game, I found myself unable to make the final ascent. When the solution was later shared with me, it turned out I'd been building bad bridges all over again: by not mastering a late-game mechanic, I'd only learnt a wrong way to read the puzzle.

Any individual puzzle in *Bonfire Peaks* is good – brilliant, actually – tightly crafted, using every part of a puzzle map for necessary bottlenecks, obstructing height, or escalating stairways precisely as needed. Its world is beautiful, and as a collection of puzzles, it's incredibly smart. If only its uneven progression and self-conscious story additions didn't make for as rough a climb. ■

EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

The ups and downs of puzzle-solving

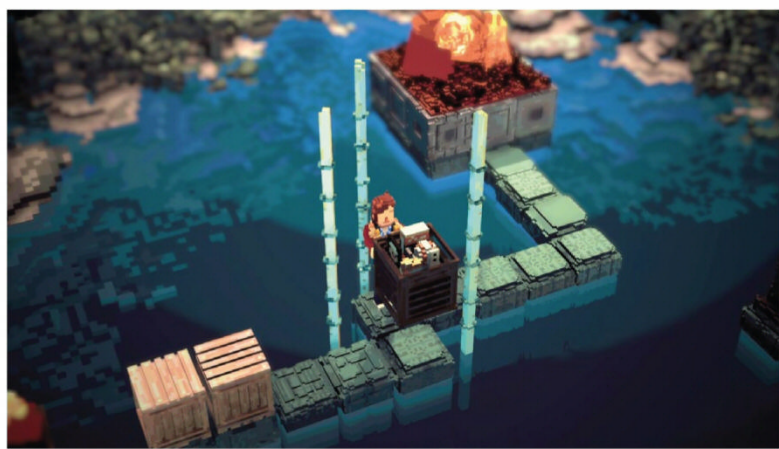
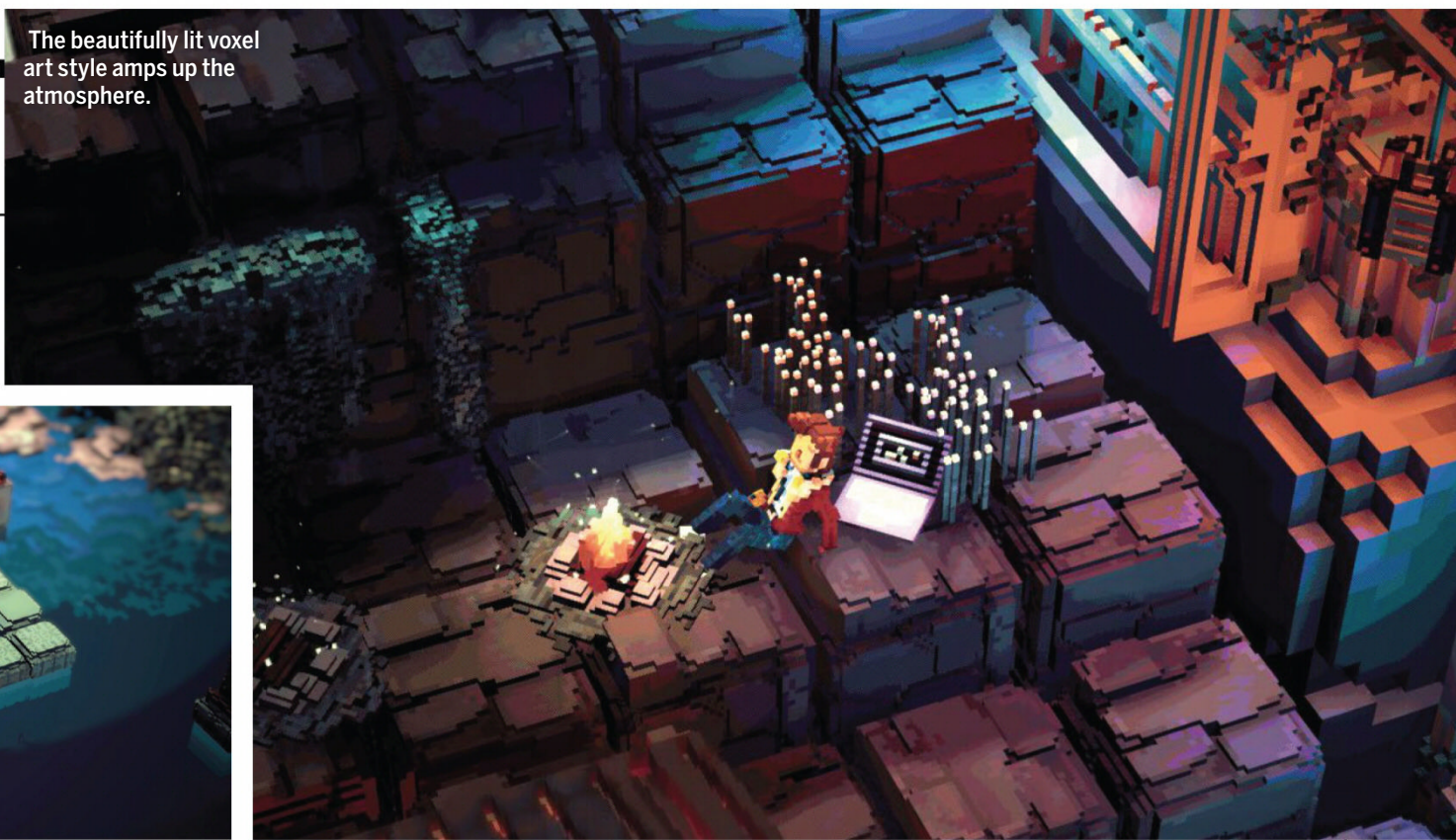


PC GAMER VERDICT

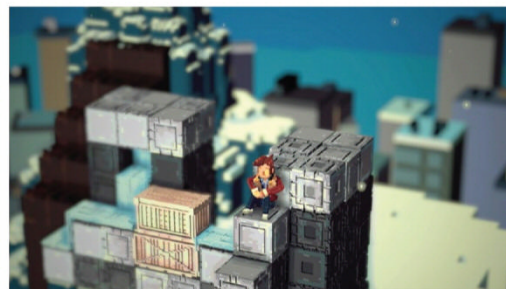
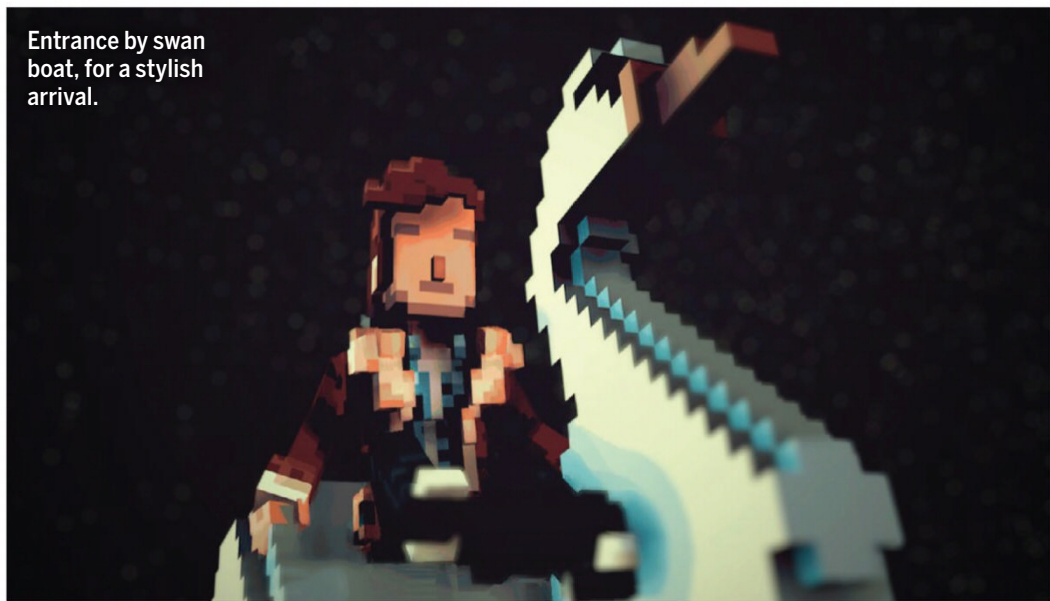
Bonfire Peaks is charming – but without establishing its tricks, it risks leaving less fluent puzzlers behind.

79

The beautifully lit voxel art style amps up the atmosphere.

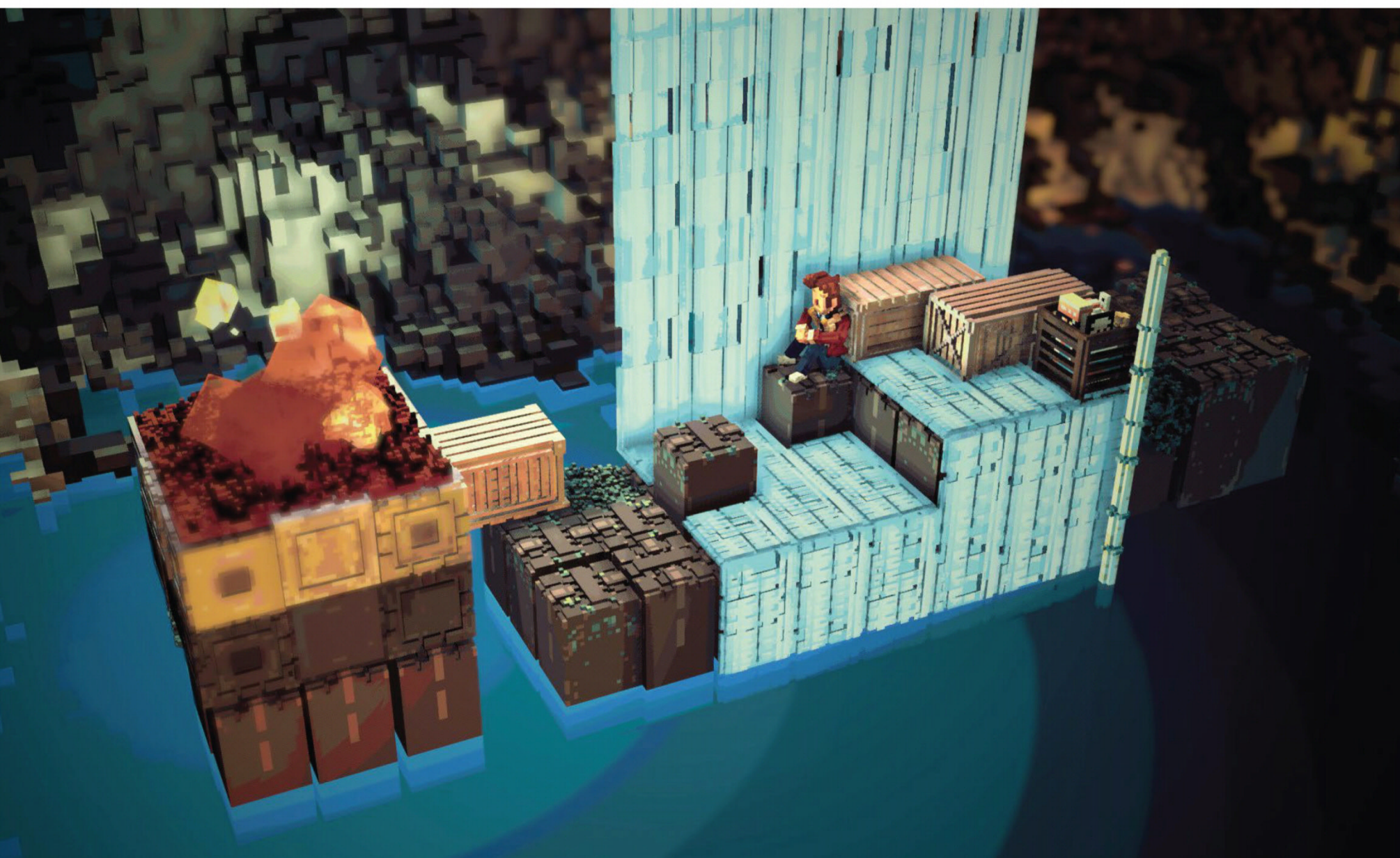
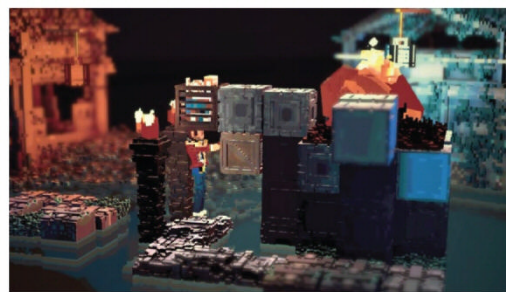


Entrance by swan boat, for a stylish arrival.



LEFT: The view from my failed ascent. So close, and yet, so far.

BELOW: You have to sit under waterfalls.



WORLD-WEARY

NEW WORLD tries to do a lot of things, but stumbles frequently

By Fraser Brown

New World feels like it's been algorithmically designed to ensnare anyone craving a big MMO. It ticks all the boxes and, as a bonus, smartly takes advantage of the seemingly inexhaustible desire for new crafting and survival games. It ensorcells with its many progression systems and has this impressive ability to make chopping down 100 trees at 2am seem like a reasonable, even entertaining, prospect.

This is true of the early days, at least, when everything is new and the island of Aeternum stretches out before you, beckoning you to explore it. But this is a game of diminishing returns that obstinately refuses to evolve, and with the honeymoon period over, I'm looking for an exit.

With its beefy crafting system, open PvP, player-led wars, and dynamic economy, it does so much right on paper, but the reality is a lot less scintillating: hour after hour of running through forests you've long grown sick of seeing, facing the same enemies over and over for most of its 60 levels, praying for any kind of novelty to liberate the experience from the doldrums.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Even though so little has changed after hundreds of hours of grinding, I still can't say I know *New World*. It is an MMO in desperate need of an identity. There's a colonial aesthetic

and old world pioneers exploring a magical island that looks like a big North American forest, but those themes and ideas aren't really explored at all. It's purely cosmetic.

And the PvE quests and quest-givers that normally do the crucial work of fleshing out an MMO setting do nothing of the sort.

New World's quests are dire. It's the same handful of mindless objectives and just as

few enemy types repeated ad nauseam, with a structure that invites exasperation. Instead of popping into a settlement and grabbing loads of quests for a specific area, you'll grab a couple, run all the way across the territory to kill ten bison, and then run all the way back. As a reward, you'll be treated to another quest, sending you back to that area again.

With no mounts and a fast travel system that charges you currency with a fixed cap, you'll be doing an absurd amount of running around. If Aeternum was the kind of place that

Things do get a bit more challenging as you approach the endgame

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Amazon's attempt at building an MMO

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Amazon Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
newworld.com/en-gb

inspired exploration, this might be less of a pain in the arse, but these journeys are devoid of interesting diversions. Aeternum is a pretty place, certainly, and for a long time I was happy to slowly saunter through its forests and swamps, admiring the natural world and the occasional ruin, but there just isn't much variety.

Combat is in a similar situation, where the choice to use an action-based system instead of rows of hotbars is initially very welcome, but quickly runs out of steam. Things do get a bit more challenging as you approach the endgame, encouraging you to engage with the system more, but for hundreds of hours you'll see little growth. When you level up you get more points to put into your strength, dexterity and so on, but each weapon type also has an experience bar, as well as two progression trees with three abilities each. You'll unlock all your weapon abilities very quickly, however, and if you find a pair of weapons you're comfortable with – I stuck to rapiers and muskets for most of the game – you're looking at hundreds of hours where you're just getting the odd passive bonus and not much else.

With five players and so many monsters, dungeons – called 'expeditions' in *New World* – are where the fights are their messiest. The first trio of dungeons are bland trips into underground ruins filled with things you've already killed so many times before, but things do pick up, with more distinct settings and tricky boss encounters that require a bit of planning and communication. The majority of the fights still just put you in a big pile of players and mobs where you can hardly see what's going on, but you can expect a few more thoughtful scraps with unique enemies.

GRUDGE MATCH

New World's real appeal, and the closest it gets to a focal point, is the faction rivalry. Three factions are

WAR, WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

How *New World's* wars work



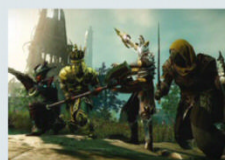
1 Once a territory has been claimed by a faction, it can be flipped to another one, but not without a bit of work.



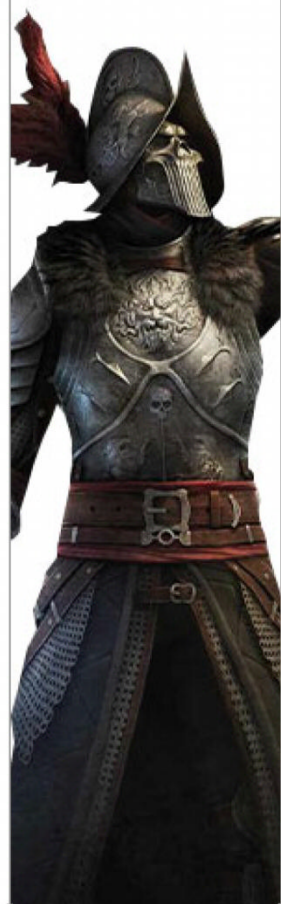
2 Completing PvP quests in the territory and taking over forts will eventually throw the land into disarray.



3 A single company gets to take charge, based on a lottery that's weighted towards the more dominant ones.



4 The company in charge gets to schedule the war and pick combatants, which is why it's hard to get a shot.



I can't believe you're not allowed to ride the big bear. Criminal.



FAR LEFT: Camping is an extremely popular pastime in Aeternum.

LEFT: When you're venturing through a hellscape, it's important to take a rest.



I'm really showing this giant red ball who's boss.



ABOVE: All this walking has made me very tired.

RIGHT: I hope you love fighting wolves, because that's 50% of *New World*.

FAR RIGHT: When the ground is on fire, you probably don't want to stick around and fight.



Protect your forts if you want to hold onto territory.

looking to take control of Aeternum, with companies – *New World's* guilds – representing them by fighting wars and claiming settlements. When a company claims a settlement, it gets to tax players using its services, like crafting and player housing, as well as providing company and faction-wide benefits. These settlements are the hubs for each territory, so there's plenty of foot traffic, and a lot of competition.

Most of what you can craft is extremely mundane – some new gear, some food, some furniture for your house – and you'll never encounter the meaty projects you can usually find in a dedicated crafty survival game. But I still find the actual act of crafting, and the gathering before that, deeply compelling. Unlike most MMOs, where you'll find a few gathering nodes here and there, Aeternum is filled to the brim with stuff to chop down, mine, pull out of the ground, and skin. Even when things are quiet, you'll still usually hear the telltale sign that someone is at work – the crack of a pick axe striking iron, or the thud of an axe hitting wood.

All this time you're helping other players, fulfilling orders that will develop a town, or filling the trading post with your surplus. If you're doing this in a territory controlled by your company, or another company in your faction, you'll receive both buffs and discounts, giving you more reasons to paint the map of Aeternum your colour. You'll also get these for just hanging out and doing stuff in specific territories, increasing your influence with them and getting to pick from a set of bonuses.

There are a few ways to support your faction. You can do town projects – craft this thing, hunt this thing – that contribute towards the growth of a settlement, allowing the company in charge to level up crafting stations and the like, in turn changing how the settlement actually looks. You can also embark on PvP quests that increase your faction's influence in a territory until you can declare war and flip it.

Most of what these quests get you to do is rote and repetitive, but the reward for this busywork is a real sense that you're involved in something big. You're building up to a war, improving a town, and actually

leaving a mark on the world. It's a small mark, sure, but combined with the efforts of your fellow players it can transform things dramatically. And the PvP quests, at least, are elevated whenever other players flagged for PvP show up. Gathering 100 wood isn't much of a quest, but gathering 100 wood while 20 players try to murder you? That's exciting.

My faction, the Syndicate, is the underdog of the server

WORLD WAR

My faction, the Syndicate, is the underdog of the server, with a grudge against the dominant faction, the Covenant. Our conflicts with them have been so one-sided

that there's now a conspiracy suggesting that we've got a mole. There's intrigue and paranoia, and it's the closest *New World* has come to feeling like a living world.

It's a shame, then, that the culmination of these conflicts, wars, are only for the privileged few. See, when your faction has enough influence in a territory, every company in the faction has an opportunity to declare war, with the winner chosen by a lottery system. The company that gets to declare war also gets to take the settlement for themselves, and gets to choose who actually gets to fight in the big siege and when. Since the lottery is weighted towards companies that contribute the most, it's always going to be the biggest and most active companies getting to decide who

plays. And if you're not in that company, your chances of participating are greatly diminished. Even if you are picked, you can be kicked at any time, all based on the whims of strangers.

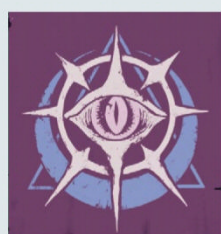
At least the world PvP has almost no restrictions, and it's where the most fun can be had. My most memorable experience in *New World* was a five-hour PvP session that saw me jumping all over the world trying to throw territories into conflict, accompanied by hordes of Syndicate pals. It's genuinely a thrill to see a quiet grove thrown into disarray as a murderous train of bloodthirsty players charge into it on a PvP quest. And you can even get a taste of the war mode's sieges. Every territory has a fort with dense fortifications and even some defensive structures for attackers to hide behind as they exchange musket fire.

While reaching the endgame rewards you with some new dungeons and territories to quest in, I'm so tired of *New World's* half-hearted PvE that I'm only really interested in continuing the conflict between the factions. Unfortunately, even that's not currently enough to make me stick around. It's been fun to be an underdog for a while, but that enjoyment starts to wither when you realise there are so few opportunities to improve your faction's position. With fewer territories and new players not wanting to join the losing side, all you get is a slow decline. There's just a sense of hopelessness, with the main companies now planning on jumping to another server.

New World's attempt to tick all the boxes has left it feeling scattershot and underbaked. The PvE is the main victim, which seems to exist purely out of obligation. But the sandbox, with its competing factions and hypnotic crafting loop, kept me logging back in, at least for a few hundred hours. There's still enjoyment to be had, then, and the busy servers make this the best time to experience what *New World* actually does well, but now that I've seen all it has to offer, I don't feel a compulsion to continue. ■

CHOOSE WISELY

What faction should you pick?



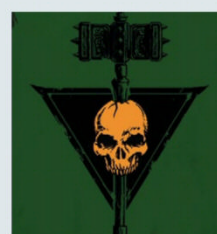
THE SYNDICATE

All factions are functionally the same, which means the Syndicate's cool-looking gear makes them the clear winners. They're also the underdogs on my server, which made me gravitate towards them.



THE COVENANT

Churchy nerds who love the colour yellow, this preachy bunch feel like the natural villains of the game, mostly because they keep beating up the Syndicate on my server. Leave us alone, you horrible bunch of zealots.



THE MARAUDERS

The Marauder's status as the most militant faction doesn't mean much. This lot loves a fight, but we all do. They're still better than the damn yellows, though, and they helped the Syndicate out in a few wars.

PC GAMER VERDICT

New World's engaging crafting and faction rivalries are held back by abysmal PvE and a boring world.

60

CRUISE CONTROL

Superbrothers returns with another poetic adventure in **JETT: THE FAR SHORE**

By Rachel Watts

It's been almost ten years since developer Superbrothers released *Sword and Sworcery* – the story of a warrior exploring a strange, magical realm. It was a quietly dream-like adventure with a strange mysticism suffusing its lightly-sketched world. With the studio's new game, *Jett: The Far Shore*, Superbrothers, together with a little help from Pine Scented, has taken that mysticism and applied it to a grand science-fiction adventure, the result being a lofty, sweeping story where the rational goes head-to-head with the spiritual.

It starts off as a familiar sci-fi tale. Humans have messed up the planet and in desperation to save civilisation must now look for a new home amongst the stars. The trope has been done to death, but in *Jett* it's different. The humans are not only looking for somewhere to live, but have been contacted by 'the hymnwave', a divine invitation from a being situated on an alien planet. Desperate to escape their dying world, a group of space scouts is formed to head out into space and see whether this strange planet – dubbed 'the far shore' – could become a viable new home for the human race.

You play as Mei, a scout pilot who has been chosen to be part of the

team. After arriving on the planet, early game tasks are all about exploration. Driving a nippy little ship called a 'jett', you need to observe the planet's ecosystem and gather data. Your jett is equipped with tools to help you research, including a scanner, flashlight, and grappling hook, and as you cruise through the landscape you can scan different vegetation and animals to see how they behave and fit into the wider ecosystem.

It's a little tedious, but *Jett's* alien landscape makes you want to do the research. This mysterious planet is home to huge lakes, vast pink meadows, and vast, purple plains. There are plenty of weird ways to experiment and explore, such as

A group of space scouts is formed to inspect the planet

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A contemplative sci-fi adventure about humans escaping extinction

EXPECT TO PAY

£24

DEVELOPER

Superbrothers, Pine Scented

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Radeon RX 5700 XT, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

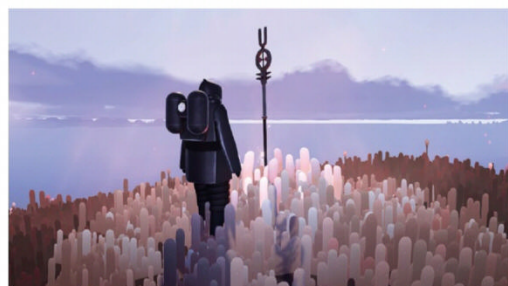
LINK
jett.fyi

hovering your jett over various plants and using the boosters to 'pop' them, unleashing waves of colourful spores. It's fun to discover these little surprises but, unfortunately, it's made less appealing by the flying controls, which can be fiddly at best, frustrating at worst.

Your jett just feels quite awkward to move around. It's obvious that the ships built for speed, not precision. The world around you inspires all kinds of tricks, with features like obvious launching points built naturally into the landscape and booster plants growing all around that can hurl you up into the air. I wanted to treat the environment like a stunt track – but I was never quite able to reconcile that dream with reality due to the finicky nature of the controls. It's a good thing my co-pilot, Isao, is a chill dude because I'm constantly crashing into cliffs, snagging on rocks, and getting caught in patches of vegetation.

GROUND CONTROLS

There are plenty of dramatic encounters where you have to zip away from flying perils, but often they're more frustrating than

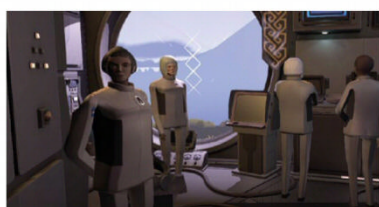
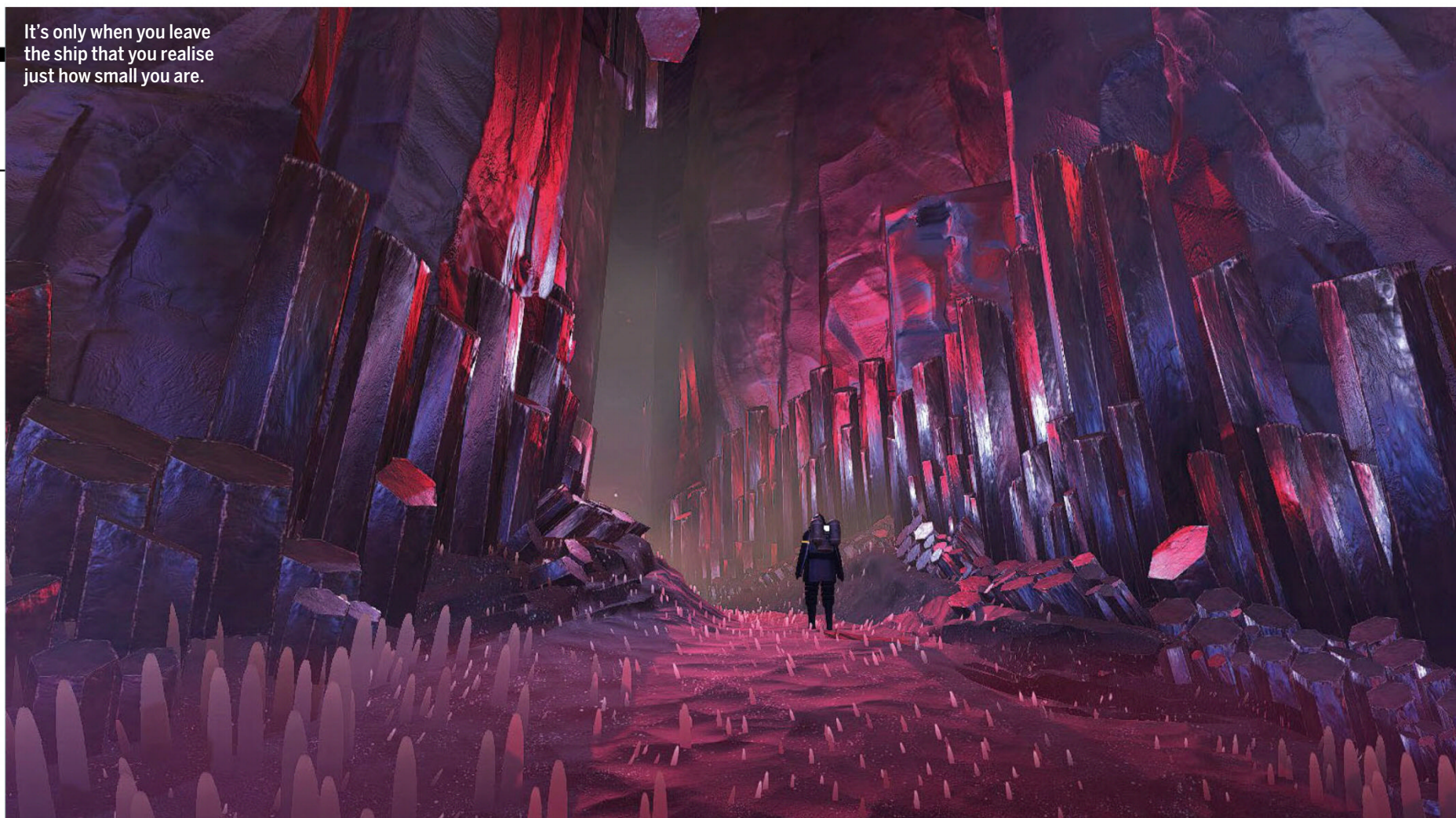


TOP: A protective barrier from the harmful moon waves.



One of *Jett's* many alien landscapes.

It's only when you leave the ship that you realise just how small you are.



exciting. However, when these events happen in open waters or in expansive plains, they're nothing short of thrilling. Darting across the sea trying to outpace a red haze that's cast down from a blood moon was one of the game's many highlights. Those moments where you're speeding across exposed waters, pedal to the metal, feel amazing.

The main hook for *Jett's* story is its cryptic spirituality. Without giving too much away, there's talk of visions, legends, promises, and scripture – everything you need to weave together a foundation for a grand narrative. But many of these intrigues fall to the wayside, with many of the missions being simply busywork – collecting resources, finding lost parts, running away from enemies – and not about uncovering the mysteries of the planet.

Jett: The Far Shore has an epic hook: A civilisation trying to outpace oblivion, so desperate to escape extinction that they'll follow the lull of an ominous intergalactic force at the promise of sanctuary. The finicky controls leave much to be desired, but at its best *Jett: The Far Shore* is a spellbinding adventure. ■

PC GAMER

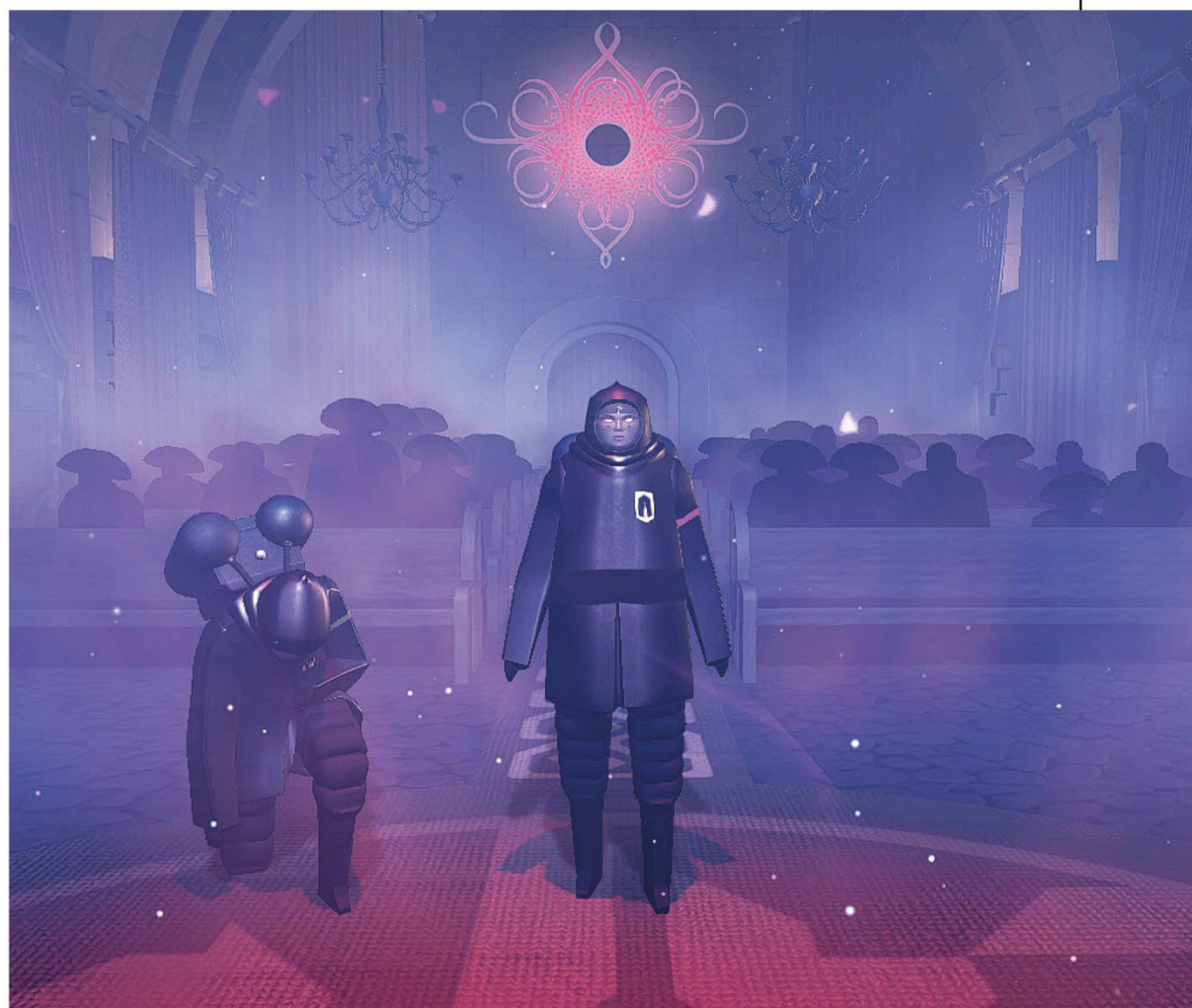
VERDICT

Jett: Far From Shore has some epic highs but fiddly ship controls and unanswered questions bring it down.

70

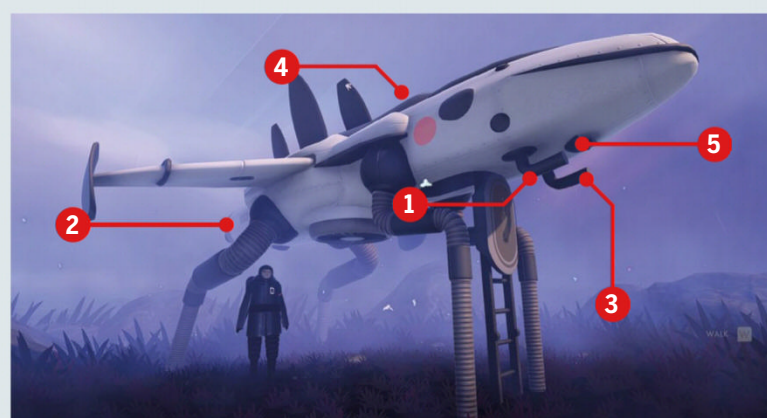
ABOVE: The scout's homebase, it's prettier on the inside.

RIGHT: Mei has cryptic visions – don't ask me what they mean.



IN SHIP-SHAPE

Gadgets to help with your space expedition



1 SCANNER

Discover details about the lovely flora and fauna around you.

2 BOOSTERS

For quick getaways when being chased by an angry alien pterodactyl.

3 FLASHLIGHT

Great for caves and dark crevices. May cause some plant life to burst into spores.

4 REPAIR

A quick repair system is a must if you happen to be a terrible driver (me).

5 GRAPPLING HOOK

The perfect mechanical claw for collecting plants and rocks.

FRESH FACE

BACK 4 BLOOD makes a triumphant return to the genre Turtle Rock created

By Morgan Park

Remember when *Left 4 Dead* established the run-and-gun co-op genre as we know it, and then Valve stopped making them after hitting the number 2? I love *Left 4 Dead 2* and no other co-op game has managed to scratch the same itch. *Back 4 Blood*, which was made by the original *Left 4 Dead* studio, is a remarkably fun shooter that manages to out-zombie *Left 4 Dead*, which I was starting to believe was impossible.

Back 4 Blood recaptures the tempo of 2009, where I'm lining up headshots by the dozen while I shoot the shit with friends. Turtle Rock has faithfully resurrected the fun, heart-pumping zombie slaying that others have only attempted. Just making an unambitious *Left 4 Dead 3* would've been enough for me, but *Back 4 Blood* is also a deck builder, a looter, a hero shooter, and even a bit of a roguelite. It's a game that Turtle Rock couldn't have made ten years ago, and it's the addition of these smart, modern ideas that make it great.

Right from the jump, *Back 4 Blood* flips the premise of *Left 4 Dead* on its

head. You're no longer average-Joe survivors scrambling to escape crumbling cities. You're zombie-killing mercenaries who hunt down infestations, rescue trapped civilians, and gather supplies for surviving settlements. Each bundle of levels begins with your party leaving the safety of the Fort Hope hub world to go look for trouble. It's kinda like skipping straight to later seasons of *The Walking Dead*

in which everyone still alive is a superhuman murder machine. This describes *Back 4 Blood's* Cleaners, eight tough characters with unique stat bonuses for themselves and the entire team. These aren't

A game that Turtle Rock couldn't have made ten years ago

CLEAN UP

Meet my four favourite Cleaners



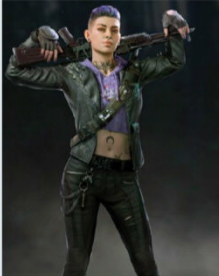
WALKER
Favorite weapon: Glock 23
Walker is a great starter cleaner that deals extra damage to everything and gives the team more health. He also gets an accuracy bonus for every precision kill he nails



HOLLY
Favorite weapon: Wooden bat
Holly can fit into all sorts of deck builds, but her unique ability to gain stamina back on each kill makes her deadly with a melee weapon. She also comes with damage resistance.



DOC
Favorite weapon: MP5
Doc can heal everyone for free once per level and restores more HP with medkits. She also grants trauma damage resistance, protecting everyone's max HP.



KARLEE
Favorite weapon: AK-47
Karlee helps herself and her team by sensing special zombies through walls, a perk that's never not handy. She also boosts her team's use speed for tool items.

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? A co-op FPS from the makers of *Left 4 Dead*
- EXPECT TO PAY £50
- DEVELOPER Turtle Rock Studios
- PUBLISHER Warner Bros
- REVIEWED ON RTX 2060, Ryzen 5 2600 3.4GHz, 16GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER Yes
- LINK back4blood.com/en-us

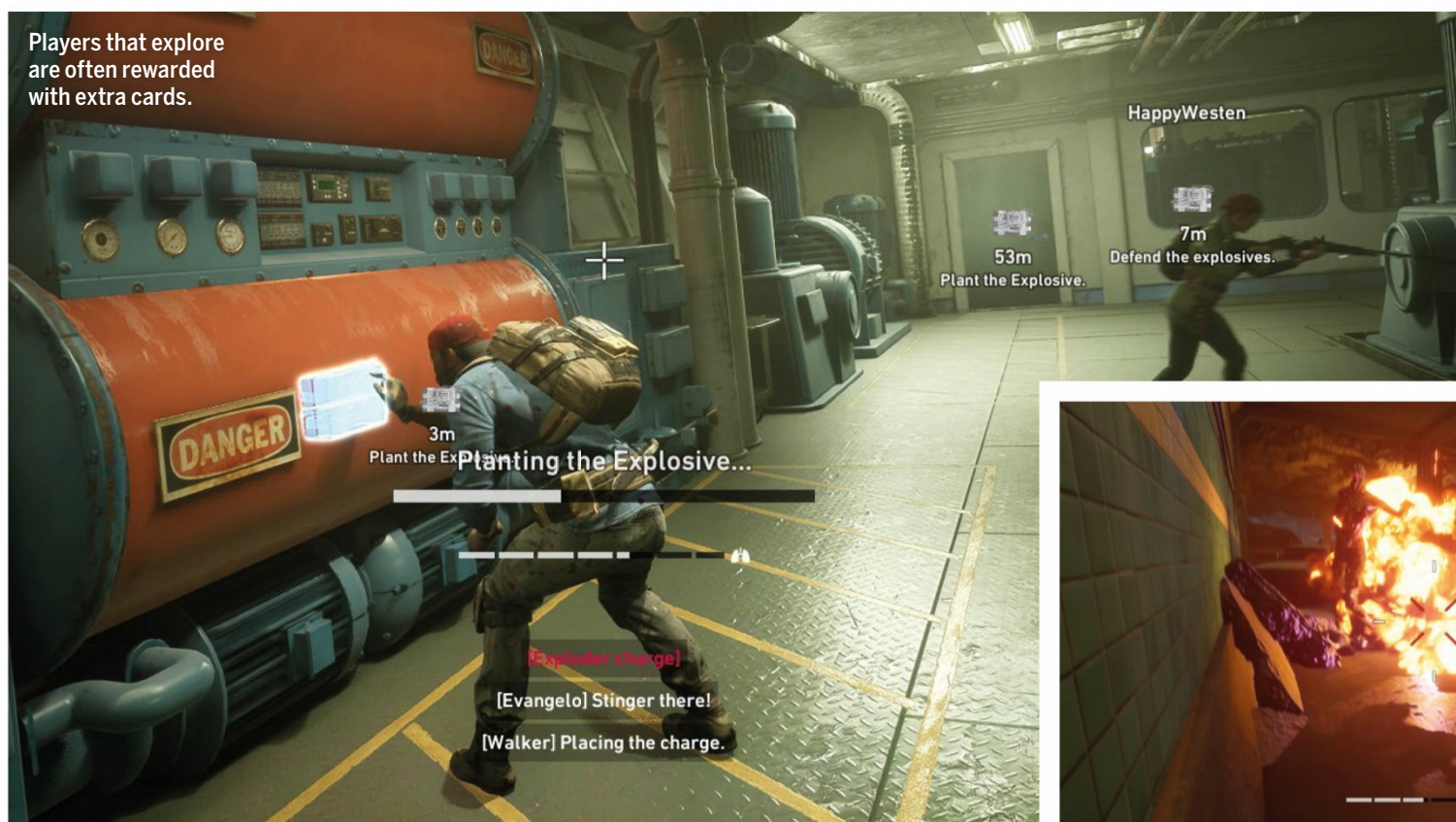
Overwatch heroes with splashy ultimate abilities, but the Cleaners do invite interesting, slightly different playstyles – Holly is a melee specialist who earns stamina back on each kill, Hoffman carries an extra grenade and gives the whole team more ammo, and Mom gets a free revive once per mission. *Back 4 Blood's* Cleaners won me over, not because they have a ton of personality, but because it's fun to play a specific role in this sort of game.

STACKED DECK

Between runs, players can build 15-card decks from 100-plus unlockable cards with effects that range from minor health bonuses to major gameplay changes. Each player can handpick a few cards at the start of a run, but after that they only draw one per level. If a run ends with zero continues left, everyone's deck is then reshuffled. The starter cards are a bit boring (+10 stamina, hooray), but before long I was unlocking transformative skills that encouraged me to specialise. Over 20 hours I've crafted one hell of a support deck that pairs nicely with Doc. By the time I've drawn all of my cards, I can carry more medkits, heal teammates better than they can themselves, and tank a ton of damage while I revive others.

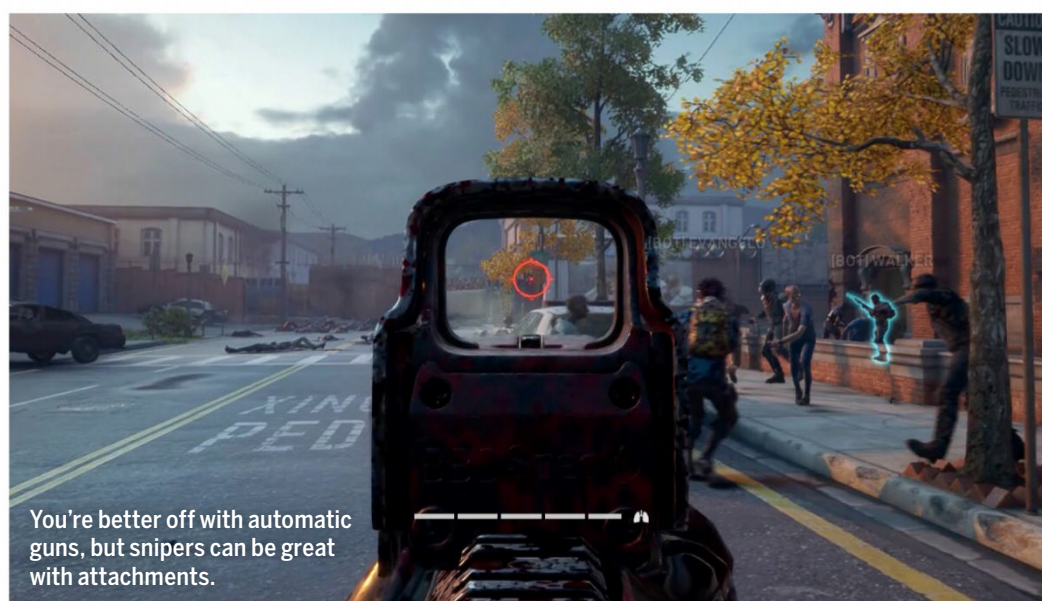
Some of the coolest cards also come with a significant drawback, like Admin Reload, which will automatically reload guns when you holster them at the cost of 15% of your ammo carrying capacity. Honestly, I was ready to hate the card system when I first read about it. It seemed like a way to artificially extend the replayability of *Back 4 Blood*, and as an FPS player, I was worried all these passive bonuses would create a bunch of invisible maths for me to fret over. Who wants to mess with cards in an action game? I'm happy to admit that I was wrong and grumpy – I've spent at least an hour of game time building

Players that explore are often rewarded with extra cards.



RIGHT: Every zombie has a weak spot, except for this exploding jerk.

BELOW: I'm way, way too close to this Tallboy. Don't be me.



You're better off with automatic guns, but snipers can be great with attachments.



» five distinct decks, and I keep going back to shift them around as I unlock more cards. It definitely helps that it's only 15 cards to a deck, though it would've gone even faster if the deckbuilding menu were designed exclusively for mouse and keyboard.

AIM TRUE

The card system wouldn't mean much if Turtle Rock didn't nail the basics. *Back 4 Blood's* gunplay is remarkably good – so good that I wish most competitive shooters played this smoothly. The Source engine's stilted first-person animations have been traded for fast, flourished reloads that beautifully bookend a fight and still look good when sped up by card perks.

Modern touches like optional hitmarkers (white for hit, yellow for crit, red for dead), a contextual ping system, and distinct sound cues for headshots provide gratifying information during every encounter. I went back to *Left 4 Dead 2* this week to compare the two games and immediately missed those hitmarkers as I emptied an Uzi magazine into a horde.

Attachments are an especially interesting addition, as they come in different rarities that can offset a gun's inherent weaknesses. I enjoy that everything you can slap on your gun is a pure buff instead of the give-and-take I'm used to in *Call of Duty's* create-a-class. The only downside to one attachment is that you're foregoing another – an Extended Fast Mag can speed up the lethargic reload of the M249, but you also lose out on armour-piercing rounds among other things.

ZOMBIE PANIC

Back 4 Blood's main campaign is a pretty long stretch of around 30 levels. There are a few stinkers, particularly the briefer finale missions that end each Act, but the majority go big on *Left 4 Dead's* linear level design.

The diversity of *Back 4 Blood's* missions feels like a direct response to the common *Left 4 Dead* criticism that it wasn't long enough. The card system gives the maps slightly different looks with Corruption Cards that modify the world and zombie behaviour. One run may be

foggy, or have armoured zombies, or zombies with exploding heads, or more security doors that trigger alarms (which trigger zombies).

The further you progress in the campaign, the meaner they get. I've spent most of my time so far on the lowest, default Recruit difficulty usually playing with at least one friend. The first two acts were pretty breezy and fun – the perfect amount of challenge for when you just wanna turn your brain off and de-brain some zombies.

One difficulty setting higher, Veteran, is the polar opposite. Cash and ammo are scarcer and med stations now cost money to restore max health. The early missions we previously breezed through are desperate fights for our lives. The appearance of these stronger mutations is supposed to be an event curated by *Back 4 Blood's* AI director, but at a certain point it feels like Turtle Rock just flips the "oops, all exploders" switch and we die. The game has only been out a few days as I write this and Turtle Rock is already tweaking spawn rates, so I expect Veteran will improve over time.

VERSUS

Speaking of pain, *Back 4 Blood* also has a PvP mode called Swarm. Like *Left 4 Dead's* Versus mode, Swarm pits four human Cleaners against four other players controlling the special zombie breeds. But unlike the old

Versus setup that was basically the standard campaign with smarter, human-controlled enemies, Swarm is a timed survival mode that repurposes chunks of campaign maps into small arenas.

The elegantly balanced sadism of the campaign goes out the window in a competitive environment. Every team I've played against has had the same idea to pin players in place with the Hocker, spew acid with the Retches, and smash us to bits with a Tallboy in one coordinated attack.

Part of the problem are the powerful upgrades zombie players can buy mid-match that boost their defence and offence. So while they only get beefier, Cleaners are basically stuck with the same junk they started with. This highlights Swarm's fundamental flaw. Getting overpowered by unreasonably strong zombie players is a feature, not a bug. Even when you win by time, you still feel like you lost.

Swarm sits in stark contrast to the thrill of limping half-dead into a safe room just as a Hunter is leaping at your face. *Left 4 Dead* leveraged the strength of its campaigns in Versus, and it's a wonder why *Back 4 Blood* hasn't done the same. If PvP was the main appeal of *Left 4 Dead* for you, Swarm will just ruin your day.

It speaks to how strong of a game *Back 4 Blood* is that one of its modes can suck so hard but it barely detracts from my overall fun. *Back 4 Blood* is its co-op campaign, and it's best played with your friends. It's definitely not the same with randos and bots, but the ping system does help bridge the communication gap if mics aren't plugged in.

I'm lucky to have played *Back 4 Blood* the way it's meant to be played, because it's some of the best co-op fun I've ever had in a videogame. And while it's a bummer that the game likely won't have the same mod support that spawned incredible player-made content in *Left 4 Dead 2* (it is a live service game in 2021, after all), I'm excited to see what's ahead on Turtle Rock's annual pass. Apparently there's a new story, new Cleaners, and new special zombie types on the way. Count me in. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Back 4 Blood is an exceptional first-person shooter that sets a new standard for co-op zombie murderfests.

88

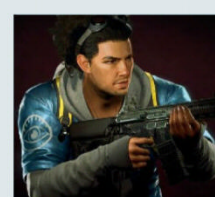
The further you progress in the campaign, the meaner they get

SHUFFLED

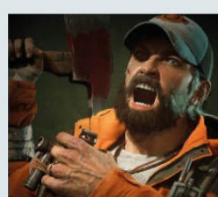
Back 4 Blood's cards change your playstyle. Here's a few favourites



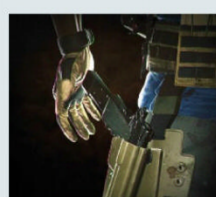
COMBAT KNIFE
Turns your standard melee attack into a knife attack.



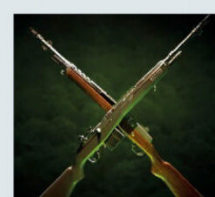
QUICK KILL
+50% hipfire accuracy, disables aim-down-sights.



MEAN DRUNK
+75% melee damage, melee attacks cleave through enemies.



ADMIN RELOAD
When you stow your weapon, it reloads. -20% ammo capacity.



TWO IS ONE AND ONE IS NONE
You can equip a Primary weapon in your Secondary slot.

FP-Chess

Let's do the time loop again in **LEMNIS GATE**

By Robert Zak

Ratloop Games Canada's *Lemnis Gate* dusts off an old-school arena shooter framework and layers it with a brilliant time loop concept. Each match consists of five 25-second rounds. For each round you pick a unique class to carry out the mission – an assortment of your classic Deathmatch, Domination, Seek & Destroy, or XM Retrieval where you grab orbs from around the map and take them back to your base.

But here's the twist: with each round you and your opponent's plays of previous rounds get looped in. So by the end of the match you and your enemy are running around amidst four past versions of yourselves, all dutifully stuck on the courses you previously set for them – until you and your enemy disrupt them, that is...

During your opponent's turn and inter-turn replays you free-fly a drone around the level, which lets you learn vital details like how the enemy's soldier will kill your soldier before you capture a control point, or how six seconds into the round an enemy will run through a certain doorway, so you can leave a mine there for him in anticipation of his inevitable arrival.

A game where twitch reflexes can be outdone by clever firing angles

As each successive round gets more and more layered with the events of previous rounds, the game becomes brain-strainingly tactical, and each new round presents its own puzzle with endless solutions. Do you try to shoot the sniper destined to kill

your speedy-dash guy who's on a path to pick up two orbs for your team? Or would it be safer to use Karl the robot in the last round to throw a protective orb between the sniper and your past speedy self, blocking that

game-changing bullet from ever reaching its destination?

When you die, you continue the round as a ghost, and you can, and should, keep carrying out objectives; should you manage to save that version of yourself from dying in a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A multiplayer FPS with a clever time loop mechanic

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Ratloop Games Canada

PUBLISHER
Frontier Foundry

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
lemnisgategame.com

future round, they could swing the match in your favour.

Each operative has their own ability and I appreciate that the game forces you to play with them by only letting you use one once per match.

BULLET TIME

The weapons, meanwhile, seem to have been procured by the developer breaking into Epic's long-buried *Unreal Tournament* bunker and making off with a bunch of gear. So expect to see renamed appearances from the beam-firing Link Gun, the teleporty Translocator, and even the goo-firing Bio Rifle. The game's arena shooter vibe is reinforced by tight maps set on intergalactic colonies, and little mobility touches like jump pads and a sliding bunny-hop manoeuvre that's invaluable to learn.

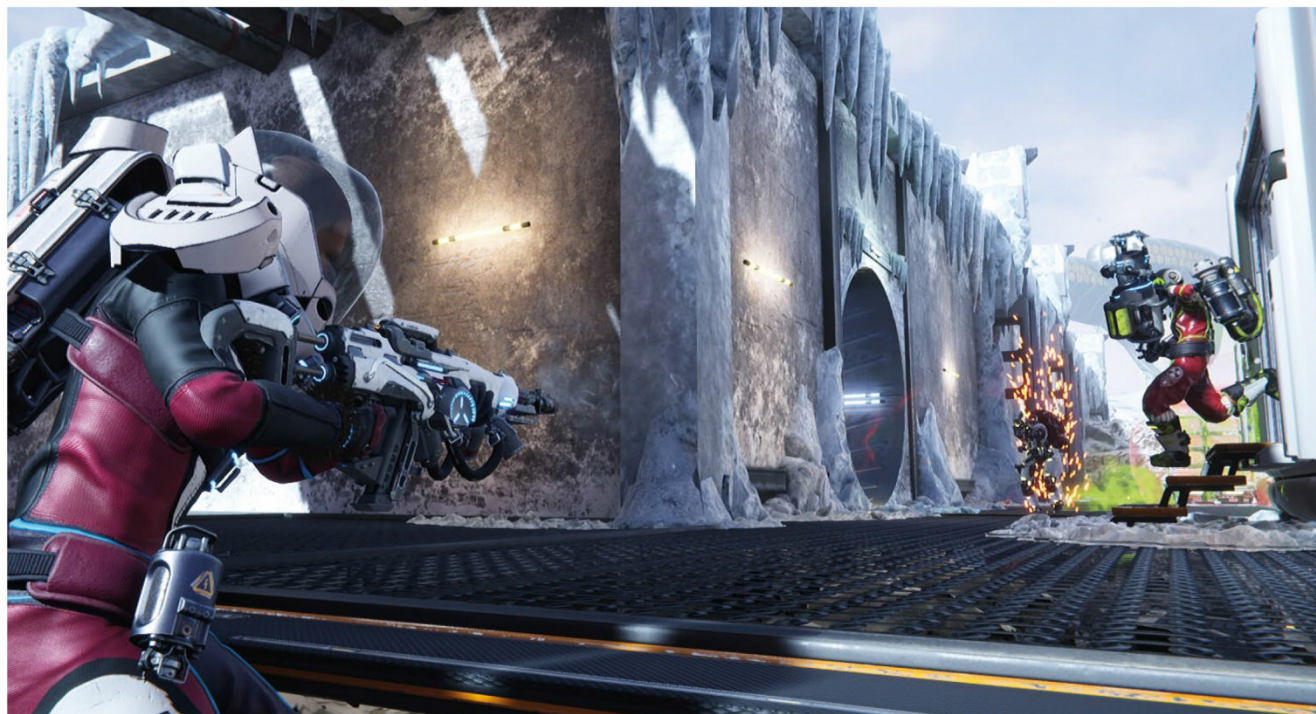
Lemnis Gate is a game where twitch reflexes can be outdone by clever firing angles, trap placements and planning. On the other hand, a heroic display of shooting prowess can undo a solid strategy in a second.

At one point in the dying moments of a match, I fired a last-ditch goo globule at a faraway looping enemy. It did just enough

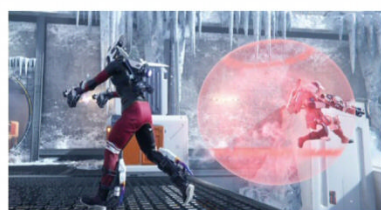


TOP: Leaving a goo trail for an enemy from a previous loop to run across is a devilish pleasure.

RIGHT: Pew, pew, and indeed, pew.



That jetpack chap you see on the left is Rush, the most mobile character in the game.



ABOVE: By the end of a match, you'll be running amidst – and killing – your enemy from previous rounds.

damage that they wouldn't survive my turret in the next room, so they didn't kill my shotgunner defending my reactor, so my shotgunner did kill the enemy rocketeer on a path to blow up my reactor. That last-gasp glob won me the game.

Lemnis Gate doesn't quite have the precision you'd want from a game where the margins between defeat and victory are so fine. Acceleration and sprinting feels stodgy, hitboxes around heads and objectives aren't always precise, and the Rocket Launcher crosshair is a nightmare. It means that amidst all the wonderful time loop choreography you devise, there are a few moments of frustration when the lack of polish undercuts your bullet ballets.

But all in all it's a very auspicious start for this high-concept twist on the arena shooter, where smart strategising between rounds and dexterous gunplay during them are constantly vying to one-up each other as you play, where games can hinge on a single bullet, well-placed turret, or, yes, a globulet of green goo fired at just the right moment. It could prove an ever-swirling timesink for shooter fans with a cerebral side. ■

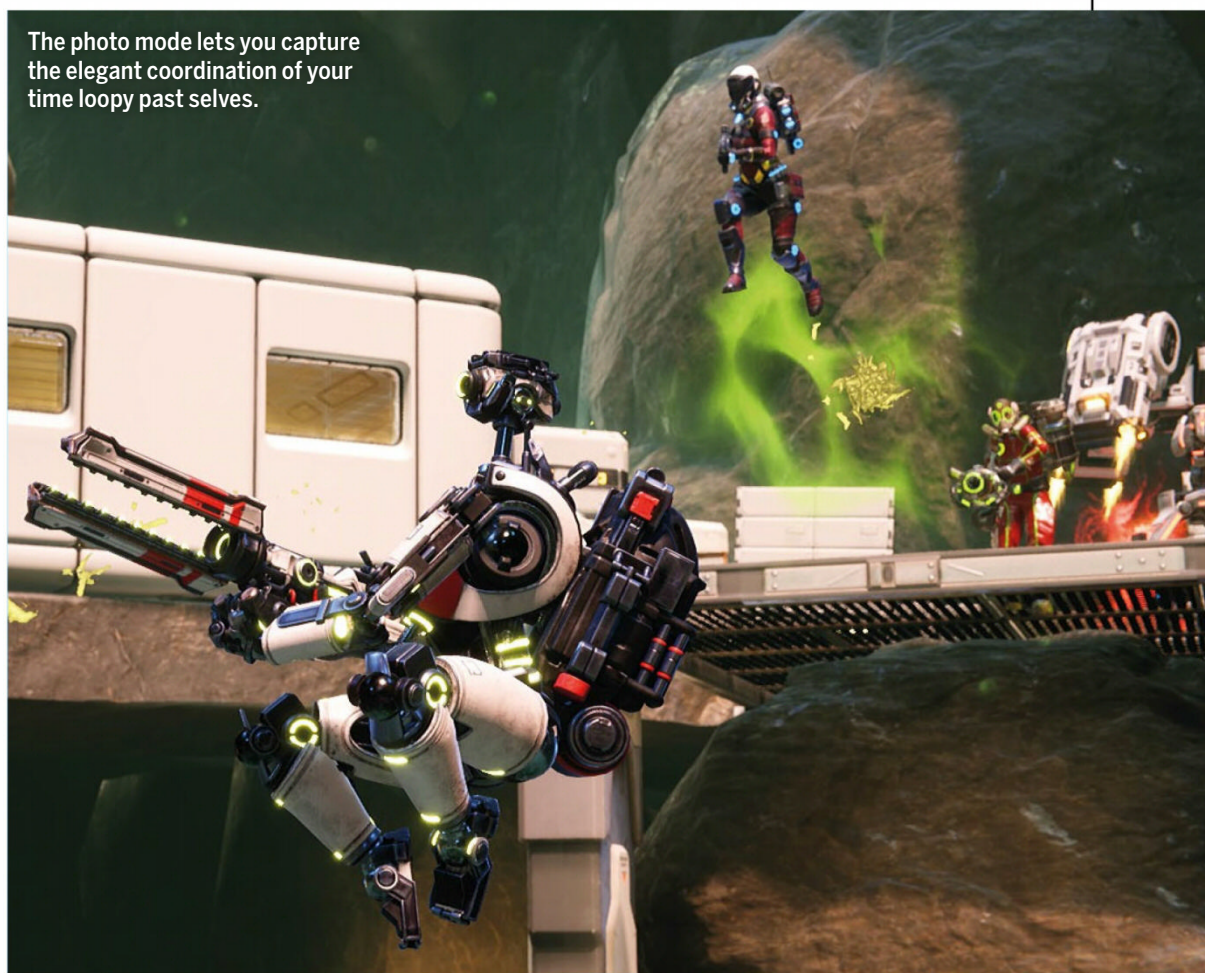
PC GAMER

VERDICT

With its well executed time loop concept, *Lemnis Gate* could be the sleeper looper shooter of the year.

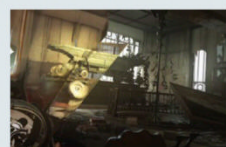
84

The photo mode lets you capture the elegant coordination of your time loopy past selves.



TIMELESS MOMENTS

Games with clever time-bending mechanics



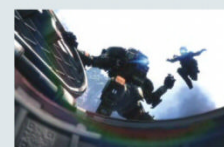
DISHONORED 2 MAGIC MIRROR

Arkane's finest time-bending moment came in *Dishonored 2*, where a piece of glass let you warp into the past. You use it to explore a mansion in two time periods.



QUANTUM LEAGUE TIME LOOP

Where *Lemnis Gate* is the time loop shooter for the Unreal generation, *Quantum League* is pretty much the same idea for *Fortnite* fans.



TITANFALL 2 TIME GAUNTLET

The Time Gauntlet in *Titanfall 2* lets you switch between past and present during one level of the game. Its particularly fun jaunting back and forth in combat to ambush enemies.



SUPER TIME FORCE ULTRA REWIND

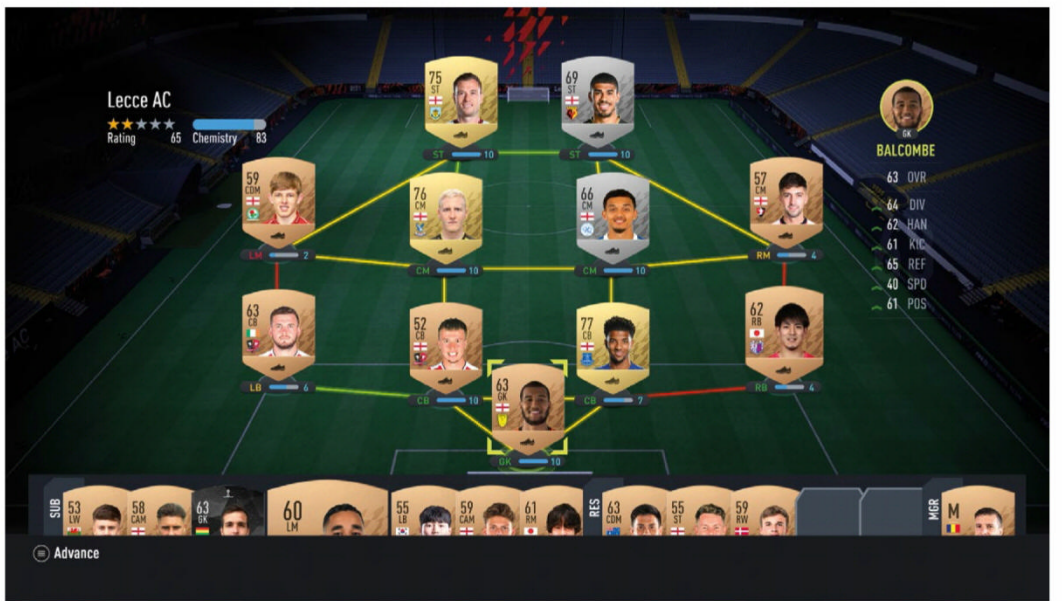
When you die in this platformer, you can rewind and jump in as a new character, playing alongside your previous self, even preventing them from dying.



ABOVE: Volta. Football in yellow pyjamas.

RIGHT: Not quite so much dabbing at St Andrews in reality.

FAR RIGHT: FUT is about to give me a CAM. I don't need a CAM. It's always Pogba.



Tifo at the Volkswagen. Or as normal people call them, flags.

THE BEAUTIFUL SAME

FIFA 22's Jogo Bonito hasn't changed much, but it's enough

By Matt Killeen

Football stopped during lockdown. So did time, as I count it. Listless, I bought *FIFA 20*. When I scored, the camera shook as it does at Anfield, and I actually cried with joy. Weird time, obviously, but this is the power *FIFA* has. If you love football, in whatever hue or flavour, *FIFA 22* should be part of your life. It recreates everything special about the game – but also its greed and superficiality, encapsulated by *FIFA Ultimate Team*.

Want to assemble your very own Galácticos? Then FUT delivers. Create that team of GOATs by slow grind, or real-world money, and challenge the world. This time there are returning greats and a new Elite Division. The challenges are fun, until you notice that advancement is glacial.

FUT IN MOUTH

Furthermore, I think it's naive to think that FUT doesn't come with a human cost. It's a loot box economy and a growing body of research states that there's a verifiable link with problem gambling. It's not the only loot box game in town, but it's the biggest and most profitable. *FIFA*'s reach, with 31 million players and an age rating of 3+, makes any deleterious effect significant.

You may love FUT and spend no money, but someone is paying your share of the billion-dollar revenue. If anyone is paying more than they can afford, that's too many for me. Even if I had the patience for the grind, I can't enjoy it while a minority who may be vulnerable to the mechanics lack the protections that come with gambling legislation, like the UK's age and marketing limits. So, as it is, I can't recommend FUT. Don't play it.

The score reflects this, but *FIFA 22* without FUT is still vast and scrumptious. More Volta tricky street football, with bearable story mode and hysterical weekend party games. Co-op Pro Clubs, kick-off quick games, House Rules, skill games, tournaments, and internationals. Something for even

the dourest fan. At 45 hours in I feel like I've only scratched the surface.

We aren't getting the HyperMotion tech like next-gen consoles, and I bristle that it's not available for top-spec systems, but I didn't notice at first. *FIFA* games look and feel amazing to play – half TV viewer, half participant, like you're there doing it, but talented. I was preoccupied by the

slower, more realistic pace, like running in treacle, and the better goalkeepers. Then I realised this was the same game again, with tweaks.

We aren't getting the HyperMotion tech like next-gen consoles

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An annual football sim that doesn't change much these days

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

EA Vancouver, EA Romania

PUBLISHER

EA Sports

REVIEWED ON

GTX 980 Ti, Intel i5-4690K, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

ea.com/games/fifa/fifa-22

At least the career modes are finally getting love. Player Career Mode, where you take a youth with potential and aim for the top, now has skill points, perks, a skill tree, and giant floating objectives. The dressing room animations of your teen cradling a man-of-the-match trophy in disbelief are sweet, and the sense of accomplishment is real. When dropped, you can now get subbed on or leave with the repaired transfer system. It's not a story mode, like *The Journey*, but it's better for the narrative being player-led.

Manager Career gets some cringey animation, but pressers that play-out like a Telltale game work well. However, after your preparations, you still play the game, with no option to watch. Your skill, or lack thereof, is still the main thing. You can sim, but you'll invariably lose.

Whether all this demands your purchase is almost moot. Regulars will want those incremental improvements, and new kits and squads. In thrall to FUT? You'll desire the shiniest, newest things. *FIFA 22* is imperfect, we deserve more, and feels expensive for what sometimes seems to me like generous DLC, or a subscription where I start from scratch each year. But ultimately those complaints barely matter – I know I'm already on board.

If you're new, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it. Gentle on the easiest difficulty, the challenge rises in satisfying steps. Ignore the faults and weave a narrative within it. That's what football really is. There's nothing like chipping one in and wheeling away to the fans behind the goal, like that amazing seven-a-side game you had once, but over and over, for an audience of millions. ■

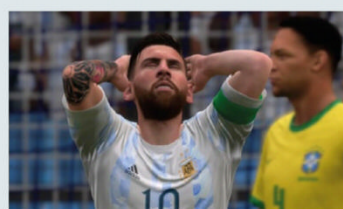
PETTY ANNOYANCES

New FIFA, old problems



WINGERS ARE POINTLESS

You can be Vinicius Júnior at the Bernabéu, but your crosses probably won't beat the first man.



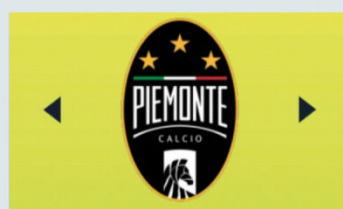
LEGENDARY DIFFICULTY

Want to see world-class players reborn as Sunday Leaguers? Not the AI's players that is, just yours.



FOULS

VAR continues to have only a spectral presence. And there's still no dive button.



JUVENTUS

Still not playing well with others and think they're too good for us. Art imitates life.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Wonderful and distasteful all at once, it entertains and fails in turns, like Frank Worthington.

76

ROLL PLAYING

THE ETERNAL CYLINDER is a unique but limited vision of evolution and apocalypse

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

A characteristically vivid and ambitious fable from the creators of *Zeno Clash*, *The Eternal Cylinder* is one part genetic sandbox to one part getaway sequence. A distant descendant of EA's *Spore*, it sees you guiding a troupe of rapidly evolving creatures called Trebhums through a world that is slowly being flattened by a vast, cosmic rolling pin. As videogame apocalypses go, it's certainly distinctive. In practice, it isn't quite as eccentric as it could be.

The titular Cylinder is a constant threat, but not relentless. Its approach is sometimes blocked by towers that dome their surroundings in shimmering energy, creating an oasis where you can forage for food and water, delve into ruins, add stray Trebhums to your horde, and most importantly guzzle down items to acquire useful mutations.

The Trebhums, which you'll control individually with the rest of the herd tumbling behind, are far from the strangest members of an ecology that blends *The Dark Crystal* with Salvador Dali. Other species include Jörmungandr-esque astral serpents, gellid ghosts that superheat the rocks beneath, and massive sauropods that conjure

sandstorms when they feed. In amongst the indigenous lifeforms are the Servants of the Cylinder itself – these are cyborg sentinels whose searchlights strip the mutations from any Trebhums caught in their path.

These enchanted reprieves around each tower are the game's highlight, an opportunity to pore over the ecology like an avaricious Attenborough – working out that one beast is another's

offspring, for instance, or how to pit certain creatures against each other. Everything flows into a compendium where item descriptions double as 'Just So' stories about the Trebhums themselves, who aren't as new to this realm as they appear.

The game's narrator is extremely generous with hints

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Like the rolling boulder levels from *Crash Bandicoot*, but you're steering a herd of mutant Q*berts

EXPECT TO PAY

£24

DEVELOPER

ACE Team

PUBLISHER

Good Shepherd Entertainment

REVIEWED ON

Intel i7-6700 HQ, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 960M, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

eternalcylinder.com

ROLL ON

The partly procedural landscapes are no less mesmerising: pink and purple icefields, curious coral lattices, and sky-scraping seedpods. The second you breach the dome, however, all that detail and colour is lost in a panicked stampede for the next tower. Other creatures cease to be miracles of nature and become obstacles, to be spooked away with trumpet blasts or simply outrun.

You'll fall victim to the controls just as often as you will roaming predators. The terrain can be uneven, and Trebhums are not built for precision: their survival relies mostly on strength of numbers. Managing your growing herd and redistributing the resources they carry in their stomachs is just as fiddly as moving around. You can press a shoulder button to switch to a Trebhum you're looking at, or hold the other shoulder button to leap around the group in freeze-time, but it's simpler to drag and drop in the menus.

If *The Eternal Cylinder* is unwieldy, it can also be over-forgiving. The game's avuncular narrator is extremely generous with hints and guidance, making this a fine



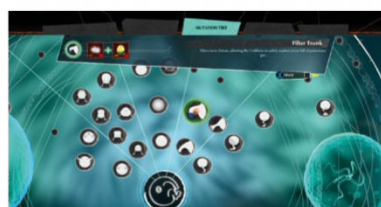
ABOVE: Temple puzzles recall the wonky mascot platformers of yesteryear.



Superheated rocks make a fair substitute for furry coats.



The Cylinder's rampage is worth watching, once you've reached a safe distance.



ABOVE: To make mutations permanent, you need a recipe from elder Trebhums.

FAR RIGHT: Losing your mutations to Servants is easy when leading a large herd.



choice for younger players. The survival elements are unobtrusive: hunger and thirst are easy to sate, even before you eat things that turn Trebhum into water filters and ladders, though later desert and tundra environments raise the stakes. While the game's story obliges you to track down certain mutations at intervals, it's often possible and therefore tempting to just make a beeline for the next tower.

The Eternal Cylinder's larger issue is that it is on some level a bog-standard upgrade-a-thon pretending to be something weirder. Many mutations are just colourful rehashes of platform and survival game staples: recurved knees for a higher jump, balloon stomachs for gliding etc.

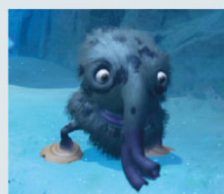
You eventually gain the ability to make your mutations permanent. And, as such, the playfulness of the opening hours soon fades away and the game just becomes a steady process of optimisation.

This is satisfying enough, but the art direction had me hungering for something more adventurous. *The Eternal Cylinder* is an admirable specimen that falls a few mutations short of brilliance. ■



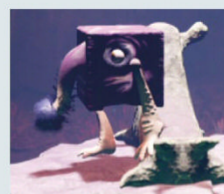
FASHION VICTIMS

My top four Trebhum looks



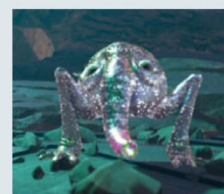
'THE BEARDED PLUNGER'

Well insulated, and with sticky feet for those 180 degree selfies, this Trebhum is as good at making a splash as it is at absorbing water.



'THE PURGATION CUBE'

In themselves those right angles are nothing to write home about, but those toxin-filtering proboscis put the 'flair' in 'square'.



'THE DISCO BALL'

A timeless look, and those recurved legs will cause uproar on the dance floor. We're pretty sure predators love the sparkly finish too.



'THE BLUNDERBUSS'

Good lord, what's going on here? No, don't make eye contact – it doesn't like it when you stare, and that trumpet isn't just for show.

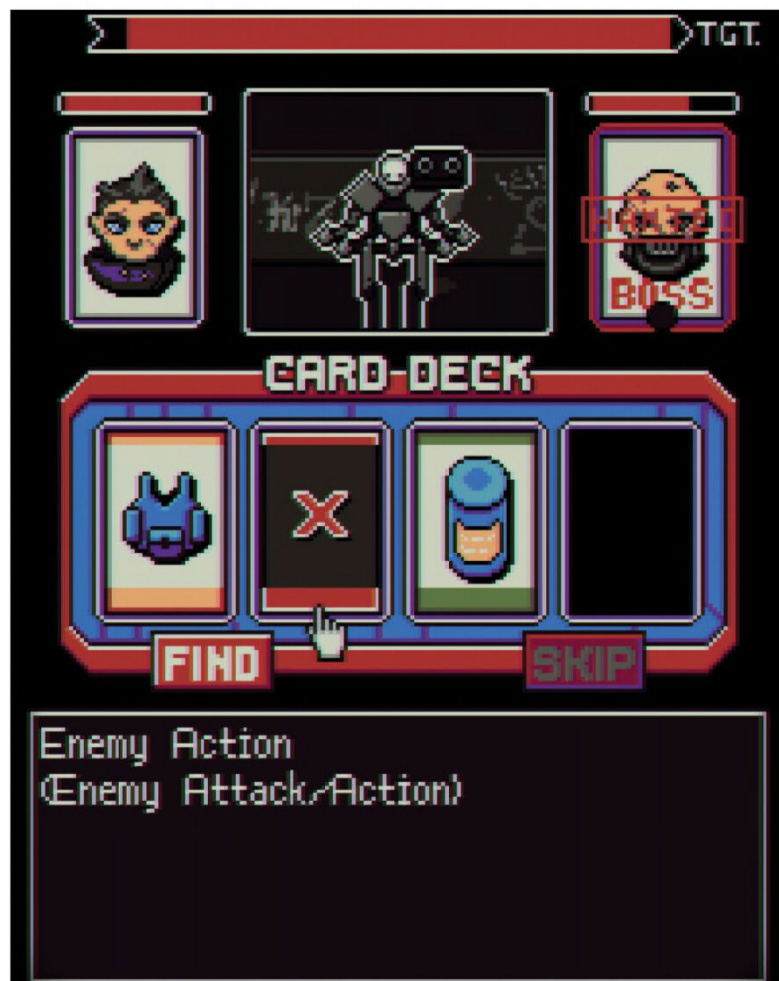


PC GAMER

VERDICT

The Eternal Cylinder is a winning but wayward chimera of survival game, surrealism and storybook adventure.

70



FAR LEFT: Body armour will absorb one enemy attack.

LEFT: Sometimes the boss escapes to another area.

DECKED OUT

Cyberpunk card game **VESPIARY** puts the deck in Deckard

If modern games have taught me anything, it's that in the future every outcome will be decided by the drawing of cards. Taking the bins out? Draw a card from your recycling deck. Crap, you drew the 'stepped in bin juice' card. Roguish sci-fi game *Vespiary* is not too far from this hellish scenario, as you can only do what the four cards in your hand allow you to do. Weapon cards are self-explanatory, but you can also bribe cops with cash cards, or uses viruses to hack machines.

If you hadn't guessed already, this is set in the gritty cyberfuture, and frankly the city is an utter state. The streets are packed with cyberscum, and it's up to you – as one of three bounty hunters – to clean it up, one crime boss at a time.

Essentially, you hop between randomly ordered events until you reach the boss and beat the scenario. Events include vending machines and traders, cops demanding ID, and violent gangs.

Combat is turn-based, but not strictly 'I go, you go', as you can choose to use all four cards in row. Not all will likely be weapons, but you may want to chug a healing potion, or throw an unneeded ID card at the enemy. It's worth a shot, as this frees up a slot for another card.

However, after every action of yours, your opponent will sneak a token into that free slot – a token you'll eventually have to click on to free it up. This initiates the enemy's turn, during which they'll launch an attack on you. After, you'll regain the slot, and can click the 'Find' button to scrounge up a random card. So it goes, turn by turn, until the battle is won.

I hope it doesn't sound complicated, as it isn't in practice, and

everything you need is handily placed on the same tiny yet handsome screen. It's a neat, novel system whether you're fighting a gang of thugs, or trying to placate a security guard, and it's particularly satisfying when you're asked for the ID card you've been holding onto, just in case.

Everything you need is handily placed on the same tiny screen

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cyberpunk game where you use cards to win battles and other random events

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Harley Wilson

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/VespGame

Likewise a cash card and a weapon dealer, resulting in a gun that will kill the boss in a single click. It's all down to random chance, but sometimes the stars align just right.

PUNKED

I found *Vespiary* far too easy though. You always seem to have the advantage, given how often you can act in relation to the enemy, and how frequently guns and body armour seem to pop up. Moreover, you get nothing for beating the game – no ending, no unlocks. You're merely dumped back to the menu.

The 'Escape from New York' feel of *Vespiary* appeals to me, and I enjoyed its novel take on deckbuilding combat. But without a difficulty curve – the whole thing stays at the same level, from your first encounter to the crime boss – the game ultimately grows seriously monotonous. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

It's original, and I love the gritty, futuristic setting. But *Vespiary* was too easy to keep me engaged.

68

BELOW: There's collectible trivia in almost every scene.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Bit Golem

LINK
bit.ly/2Zwf15t

HP SOURCE

DAGON is a slick Lovecraft adaptation

Dagon is probably the most authentic adaptation of an HP Lovecraft story yet, although it achieves this by retelling the short story word for word. While the narrator relates his dreadful tale, the player is free to look around each scene and hunt down a collection of optional trivia. It's only nominally interactive, but the sights do justice to the deliciously wrought text, as the POW protagonist escapes his captors only to arrive on an ocean floor that has risen to the surface, ancient fishy horrors and all.

Dagon is an early and very brief short story that contains the mythos in a prototypical form. The game embellishes it with strong voice acting and slick slideshow art assets that support the text rather than overpowering it. I lingered in each

scene, once the narration was done with it, taking in the atmosphere and searching for collectibles. These pickups essentially act as a director's commentary, not just on Dagon, but on Lovecraft as a whole. Did you know he hated fish, for example? Well, of course he did. Ol' Howie was also dead against booze. What you won't find is any mention of Lovecraft's racist views, which I did find odd given the grab-bag of facts that the game does present to us. You don't have to bring it up, of course – it's common knowledge that Lovecraft spouted some horrible nonsense – but in a game that finds the time for so many topics, from his views of tobacco and religion to his stint writing marketing copy, its absence made me more uncomfortable than any soggy horror lurking under the ocean. ■

65

STRING EERIE

Collecting spirits in **SYMPHONY OF SEVEN SOULS**

There's an art to creating a game without dialogue, narration, or any overt story to define what's going on, and *Symphony of Seven Souls* is a strong example of the form. The only text in the game is the title, and two simple instructions: right click to prep your violin, and hold left to make it play beautiful, context-sensitive music.

You're the game's composer as much as you're its main character, scoring a handful of locales – a gloomy church, a rain-drenched graveyard and hedge maze, a shadowy asylum that would surely house monsters in another horror game. Here you're alone – minus the hidden souls you've come to collect. You can choose whether to soak up the atmosphere, listening to the rain fall from the heavens and watching lightning illuminate the sky

as the violin notices your surroundings and shifts its music accordingly. You'll do both, of course, popping out your violin and stowing it, partly to give your ears a break, and partly because you move faster when you're not wielding the instrument. The seven souls only become visible when you are performing, however, so you're encouraged to play as you explore. I found half of the ghosts without really trying, while the others required tedious backtracking. Ultimately, the ending was worth it. I was poised to state this wasn't a horror game at all, but your final performance takes a darker turn that the violin is aptly equipped to soundtrack. A bit of backtracking shouldn't put you off a game that lets you wield something other than a gun – to great result. ■

76

BELOW: The music changes depending on where you are.



NEED TO KNOW

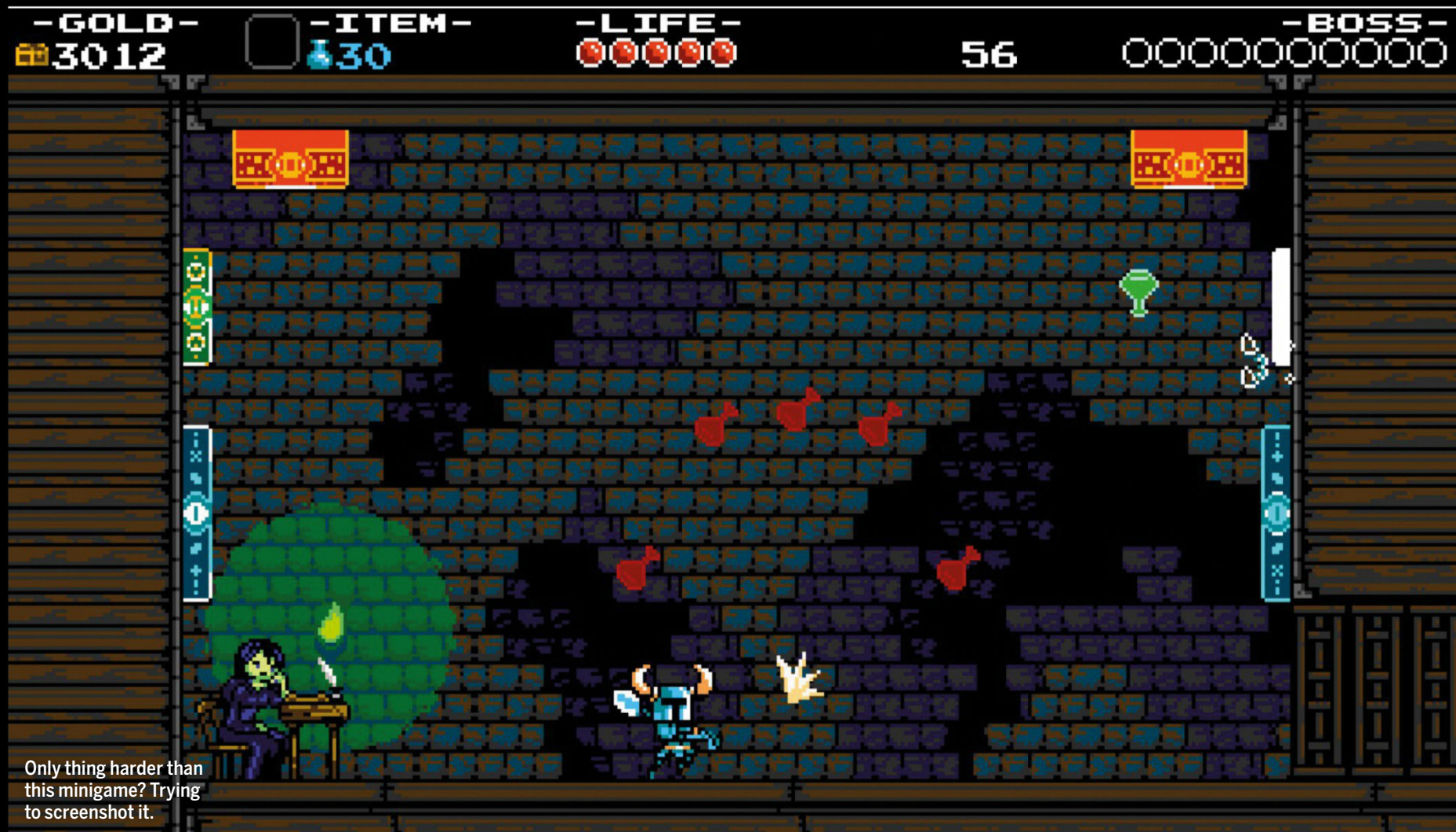
EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
katanalevy

LINK
katanalevy.itch.io

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



DIGGY BANK

Wallowing in my avarice in **SHOVEL KNIGHT: TREASURE TROVE**

Sometimes, in the dark hours, I find myself Googling stuff I owned as a kid, primarily as a means of clinging to the rain-slick precipice of youth with shrivelled fingers. These toys are universally shitter than I remembered: fire-damaged faces, limited articulation, feeble accessories. The whole enterprise feels like inventing a time machine just so I can travel back 30-ish years and laugh at my own idiot self for ever thinking old things were good.

Shovel Knight is different. It's like opening the toy box in your parents' attic and discovering that no, you're not a slack-jawed buffoon for revering the past; that somehow, the April O'Neil figure you married as a child is actually a captivating, erudite human being who doesn't even mind being locked in a box half her lifetime. You were *right* to fear change! The transition to 3D games was actually a mistake.

Subsurface scattering is the work of Old Nick. The second thumbstick should be viewed with the same suspicion a Catholic inquisitor examining a cutaneous horn.

The thing here, quite obviously, is that this is curated nostalgia. *Shovel Knight* is the work of selective minds,

picking all the best bits of retro games while discarding the chaff of punitive difficulty and bullying save points. All that remains is elegance: the perfectly-balanced downward plunge, lifted from the otherwise unremarkable *Duck Tales*; sine-wave enemy movement from *Castlevania*; boss structure from *Mega Man 2*. It makes for a game that plays like you *think* the games of your youth did, even if they didn't. It's an act

of George Lucas-alike revisionism, albeit one where 'Han shot first' is replaced by some checkpointing.

JUMP FORCE

Picking the juiciest fruits from the entire history of 2D platformers gives *Shovel Knight* a breadth of ideas that

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The Volttron of cool shit from old games

EXPECT TO PAY
£31

DEVELOPER
Yacht Club Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/250760/Shovel_Knight_Treasure_Trove

feels very Nintendo. I went into this expecting to do the same thing in a variety of levels that looked different but felt similar. But each one is distinct, easing you into a method of play that acts as a hidden tutorial for the upcoming boss fight. Each one could be the central concept for a standard platformer, but *Shovel Knight* throws ideas around like a tragic billionaire offering yachts in exchange for conversation.

And on the subject of cash: I've rarely been hungrier for glistening gems and mounds of riches than I am playing *Shovel Knight*. Every pile of stone has to be greedily dug. And every death becomes a bargain. Floating sacks of money hover where you die, and it provokes an almost animalistic response in me. And anyway, if they didn't want me to waste hours and days scratching in the dirt for coins, they shouldn't have called it *Treasure Trove*. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Shovel Knight: Treasure Trove is crisp, smart and utterly moreish. So good it's changed how I feel about shovelling.

90

BELOW: Naked, freezing bandits: my kind of enemy.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
TaleWorlds

PUBLISHER
In-house

BANDIT AID

Learning humility in **MOUNT AND BLADE: Warband**

Some troubling thoughts rise to the surface after too much time spent playing *Mount and Blade*. How many PC Gamer features would I need to write to fund my own mercenary army? Is *Warband*, with its emergent balance of trade and conquest, really just a pseudo-medieval analogue of modern commerce?

Even having sunk hours into *Mount and Blade*, the freedom of it can still be intimidating. You can trade, fight brigands, or just deliver sheep. You start with a merry band of fighters but can grow to rule entire provinces.

The journey from tiddler to minnow is a compelling, often humbling experience: just as you start to think you're a moderately big fish, some feudal whale shark swims past and swallows you whole. An example: early on, swelled by recent

victories and spectre of feeble looters fleeing from me on sight, I decide to help out an embattled village by training their peasants to fight. This, for some reason, involves us sparring in our underwear. The problem is that the bandits aren't intimidated by nearly-naked stick-welding yokels. And, in fact, they seem to consider the whole thing an insulting act of defiance. They attack. I charge into the fray, expecting to mow down the bandits before they can bludgeon the newfound confidence out of my peasants... but I'm soon waylaid and my trusty vanguard has to drag me from the battle. The fact that 'at least I didn't get taken hostage' is a bonus gives you some indication of my fall from grace. Few games teach you that you can't save everyone (or, in my case, *anyone*) with quite the brutality of *Mount and Blade*. ■

78



BROKEN SWORD: SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS DC

Imagine if, instead of an ice-capped mountain at the start of an Indiana Jones film, you saw a heap of soiled nappies. That's sort of what it feels like losing the original 'Paris in the fall...' intro in the director's cut of *Broken Sword*. But the disgust soon subsides once you start poking around in drawers and uncovering hints about medieval jiggery-pokery. Purists might sneer at sanitised cutscenes and the removal of some of the game's sterner elements. But it's lovely to play and *Broken Sword* is still one of gaming's great stories; an unfurling conspiracy based on Templar history, made years before Dan Brown farted out his tepid prose. ■

83



THE CURSED CRUSADE

The *Cursed Crusade* is the game I would have made if, somehow, I had mastered game development and medieval history aged eight. It's not enough to set it during the Fourth Crusade, a pivotal time that led to the Sack of Constantinople, lasting East-West religious schism, and the ascendancy of Islam in the Holy Land. Nope. As well as that, we need hereditary curses, undead soldiers, and a version of Death who looks like he was doodled by Todd McFarlane. It's a smothering, feculent morass of frail characterisation, miserable banter, and combat that feels like filing cabinets trying to screw. Which, now I think about it, is somehow still more appealing than *The Cursed Crusade*. ■

47



PENDRAGON

Finally getting to watch The Green Knight gave me the urge for some folksy Arthurian adventures, and few games do it more elegantly than Inkle's *Pendragon*. But instead of Dev Patel being damp on a hillside for two hours, this offers a poetic, tactical take on the Matter of Britain. And like the most unyielding versions of classic folktales, many of my journeys end in the filth on the road to Camlann, long before Mordred even realises he's won. Not altogether satisfying, then, but perfect fayre for a land of mist and phantoms. ■

78



SPORT



TECH



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

The six best gaming headsets for crystal-clear audio.

100

NEWS

Should you install Windows 11? We've done the research.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Let our expert builds guide you on your PC gaming journey.

GROUP TEST

GAMING HEADSETS

Treat your ear holes to smooth and responsive audio with one of the top headsets.

By Jacob Ridley, Dave James

The power of quality audio for gaming cannot be understated, and while you'll find plenty of computer speakers capable of rumbling your inner ear, it's the gaming headset that comes out trumps for most of our gaming needs. Finding a pair of cans that delivers excellence in positional audio, fidelity and comfort is high on the shopping list for the budding PC gamer.

If there's one thing we're not short of in PC gaming in 2021, it's gaming headsets. So you've quite the job narrowing down your options. Depending on your budget, you'll want to weigh up whether you wish to be free of wires or tethered to your desk by one. Then there are more technical decisions such as choice of driver, microphone and whether you want an open-back or closed-back design.





Blackshark V2 Pro

RAZER **£180**

Beating the Cloud Alpha at their own game

1 The wired Razer Blackshark V2 is a great gaming headset, and this wireless ‘Pro’ version takes all of the best bits and snips off the cable. The Cloud II Wireless we’ve also featured in this test has a slightly longer battery life and is a little lighter on the wallet too, but the Blackshark V2 Pro is a very close second and personally I much prefer the soundscape the slightly pricier Razer cans can deliver.

The TriForce driver design apes the fantastic HyperX Cloud Alpha headset, and matches its fantastic audio delivery. They feel detailed, punchy, yet still

rich enough to deliver an incredible experience in your chosen gameworld.

They’re also super comfortable too, and, call me a luddite, but having a physical volume dial is far more pleasing than fumbling around trying to find little buttons. My only real issue is that I’m not a fan of its little boom mic, but given the fact there are some fantastic budget gaming mics out there right now, that’s not a biggy.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

- Fantastic wireless audio
- Decent battery life
- Comfortable

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** RAZER TRIFORCE TITANIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB 2.4GHZ WIRELESS DONGLE / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 12HZ-28,000 HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE MIC / **WEIGHT:** 320G

H6PRO

EPOS **£149**

Premium all-ways

2 The H6PRO poses a question to PC gamers: should I buy open-back or closed-back headphones? Usually we don’t get the choice, as most gaming headset manufacturers cheer for the closed-back team. If you’re anything like me, though, you’re willing to fight in the open-back corner. The H6PRO is a great test bed to compare between the two because both models are the same bar a few key acoustic features. That means either way you’re getting a comfortable headset with a removable, flip-to-mute high-quality microphone and top build quality.

Onto the open-back and this headset offers a more exposed rear ear cup and breathable ear pads. These two changes alone deliver a relaxed and wide acoustic profile that cuts down on some of the harsher tones you might experience with a closed-back pair. The closed back version is a little harsher, then, but with leatherette ear pads they are a little comfier and, more importantly for some, offer greater noise isolation.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

- Open-back option
- Lovely finish
- Smart magnetic mic

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 42MM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE MAGNETIC MIC / **WEIGHT:** 309/322G

GROUP TEST



ONCE YOU'VE BEDDED THEM IN THE AUDIO BECOMES BEAUTIFULLY WARM AND RICH

3

LCD-1

AUDEZE £399

For the unashamed audiophile

3 With the increased availability, affordability and quality of standalone microphones there's no excuse for putting up with weak headset mics anymore. That route also opens up a whole world of audiophile headphones which don't offer built-in options, and that means the outstanding Audeze LCD-1 is ripe for PC gaming. I love planar magnetic drivers, far more so than the standard dynamic drivers most headsets use. And the Audeze LCD-1 pairs them with an open back design, which perfectly complements the ultra-detailed audio of a planar magnetic driver.

Though they can be almost painfully detailed out of the box. These drivers take a while to warm up – maybe 16-20 hours of use – and until then the sound can be a little 'pointy'. But they age like fine wine, and once you've bedded them in the audio becomes beautifully warm and rich, though still just as detailed and accurate.

The combination of open back design and great-sounding drivers is nearly unbeatable.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stunning audio
- Open back design
- Takes a while to warm up

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 90MM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 10HZ-50,000HZ / **FEATURES:** PLANAR MAGNETIC DRIVERS, OPEN BACK / **WEIGHT:** 250G

Model One

VZR £349

A genuine audiophile gaming headset

4 Coming out of nowhere is the VZR Model One, a high-end gaming headset that claims to cater to the audiophile. It's still rocking dynamic drivers, so none of that planar stuff here, but with an innovative CrossWave driver and an impressively broad frequency range, the Model One lives up to its promise.

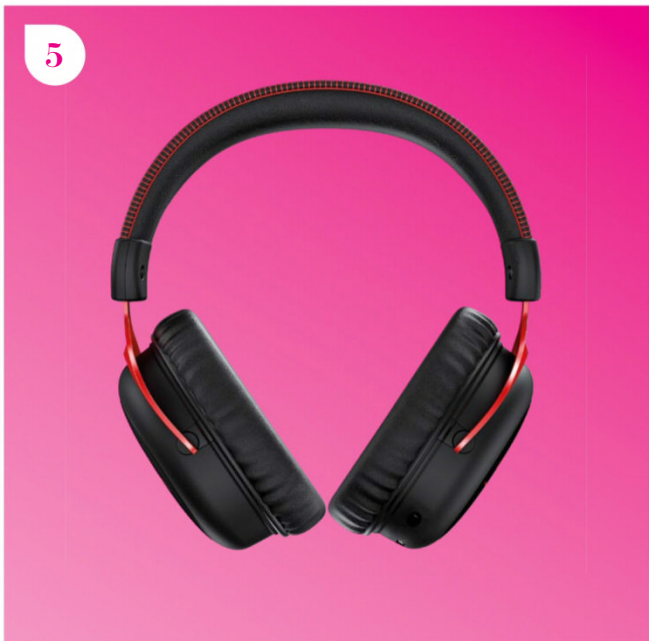
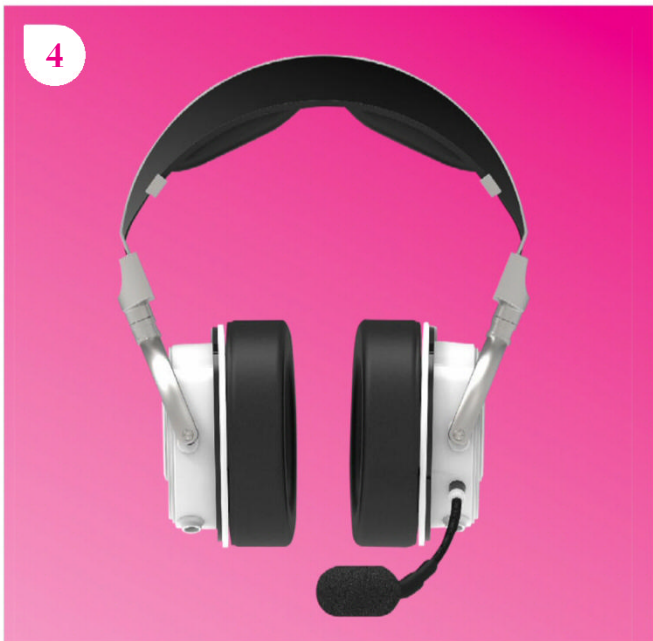
They're chunky, but the audio quality is the real selling point. The patented CrossWave driver design aims to create the detail of a reference studio speaker along with the richness and warmth of a pair of open back audiophile headphones. And it makes a good

job of it too. The sound is rich and accurate, with a tonal separation that speaks to the power of its design. That separation is what makes the Model One such a good gaming headset too, providing the necessary sprawling soundscapes which make open world games so immersive. Yes, they're as expensive as a set of audiophile headphones, but the audio quality is excellent and hey, you do get an attached mic gratis too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Genuine audiophile audio
- Comfortable design
- Robust

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 40MM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 10HZ-30,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE MIC / **WEIGHT:** 430G



WIRED
OR
WIRELESS?

Now this may seem an obvious decision to some but the price difference between a great wired set and a cheaper wireless model can still be pretty great. That means you may want to consider stripping back to wired and getting an altogether higher quality headset for your cash, rather than stretch to a wireless model with slimmer battery life that'll only become an annoyance later in life.

That's really the crux of the issue with wireless headsets. I heartily recommend ditching the cables purely for the freedom of getting up for a cup of coffee while chatting in Discord, but I must admit that I've only really fallen head over heels for wireless headsets with swappable batteries, such as the Steelseries Arctis Pro Wireless. Perhaps the more organised gamer doesn't mind the odd charge, but I'm anything but that.

Cloud II Wireless

HYPERX £120

A wireless remaster

5 Bearing the fruits of HyperX's long legacy of gaming audio excellence, the Cloud II present excellent sound and build quality with the essential features done well. Plus there's no feature-flab inflating the price. This closed-back design's stereo soundscape is punchier in the low end than we'd usually go for. Still, the extra bass doesn't interfere with overall clarity, and frankly, in games and music environments, it sounds great. The 53mm with neodymium magnet drivers are intended to give low, medium and high frequencies space to resonate without interfering with

each other, and you do get a sense of that while listening to them. Elsewhere it's the usual impressive build quality, generous padding, clear mic and high comfort levels over longer play sessions that the Cloud II design has always offered. Except nowadays it's also trimmed the cable off and gone completely wireless for total freedom to move about from your desktop and that connection is as steady as you'd hope.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

→ Clear sound

→ Exceptional quality

→ Great mic

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / DRIVERS: 53MM / CONNECTIVITY: WIRELESS, USB DONGLE / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 15HZ-20,000HZ / FEATURES: 30HR BATTERY LIFE / WEIGHT: 309G

Kraken X

RAZER £50

Zero-fuss gaming audio

6 The Razer Kraken X has been our pick for the best budget headset for a good while now, and the best bit is they keep getting cheaper with myriad sales and discounts nowadays. This headset's official price is \$50, but you can find them for as little as \$35 in the bargain bin.

Now there have been some necessary and expected sacrifices to hit that cheap and cheerful price. The big one is audio clarity, where the Kraken X loses out to other headsets in this roundup – the Kraken's extended frequency range not doing much. Similarly, it's not the most

convenient for anything but gaming, as the microphone sticks out like a sore thumb and cannot be retracted or removed.

Yet for a pure gaming headset, it does the job exceptionally well at this price. Its large memory foam ear pads are comfortable over long stints and the mic cuts through the fuzz. The 3.5mm analogue connector isn't anything fancy, but at least it offers wide compatibility for a range of PCs and consoles.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

→ Certified bargain

→ Comfy

→ Lacks audio clarity

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / DRIVERS: 40MM / CONNECTIVITY: 3.5MM / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 12HZ-28,000HZ / FEATURES: WHITE/BLACK COLOURS AVAILABLE / WEIGHT: 250G

WINDOWS PAIN

When should you upgrade to **WINDOWS 11**?

Windows 11 is officially out. You're free to upgrade to the latest OS (and it is a free upgrade for Windows 10 users), just so as long as your PC meets Microsoft's ridiculously strict system requirements. Microsoft insists machines have TPM 2.0 support, which could be problematic for many – you may just need to jump into the BIOS and turn it on, or you may need to buy a whole new PC. But regardless, should you even bother about upgrading just yet?

We've been testing Windows 11 for a while now, and the good news is that so far Windows 11 is a completely non-lethal operating system. That's a good sign, but maybe not enough justification to install it. To make the bigger call on whether you should install it right now, we've been spending some

quality time with its new Start menu, rounded corners and sound scheme.

Windows 11 proves that taste sure is cyclical. In the mid-2000s, transparency and 'glassy' user interfaces were the new hotness, and Windows Vista and Windows 7 were all about their rounded edges. Microsoft ditched that style for a decade of sharp edges and solid colours before going back to a softer style in 11.

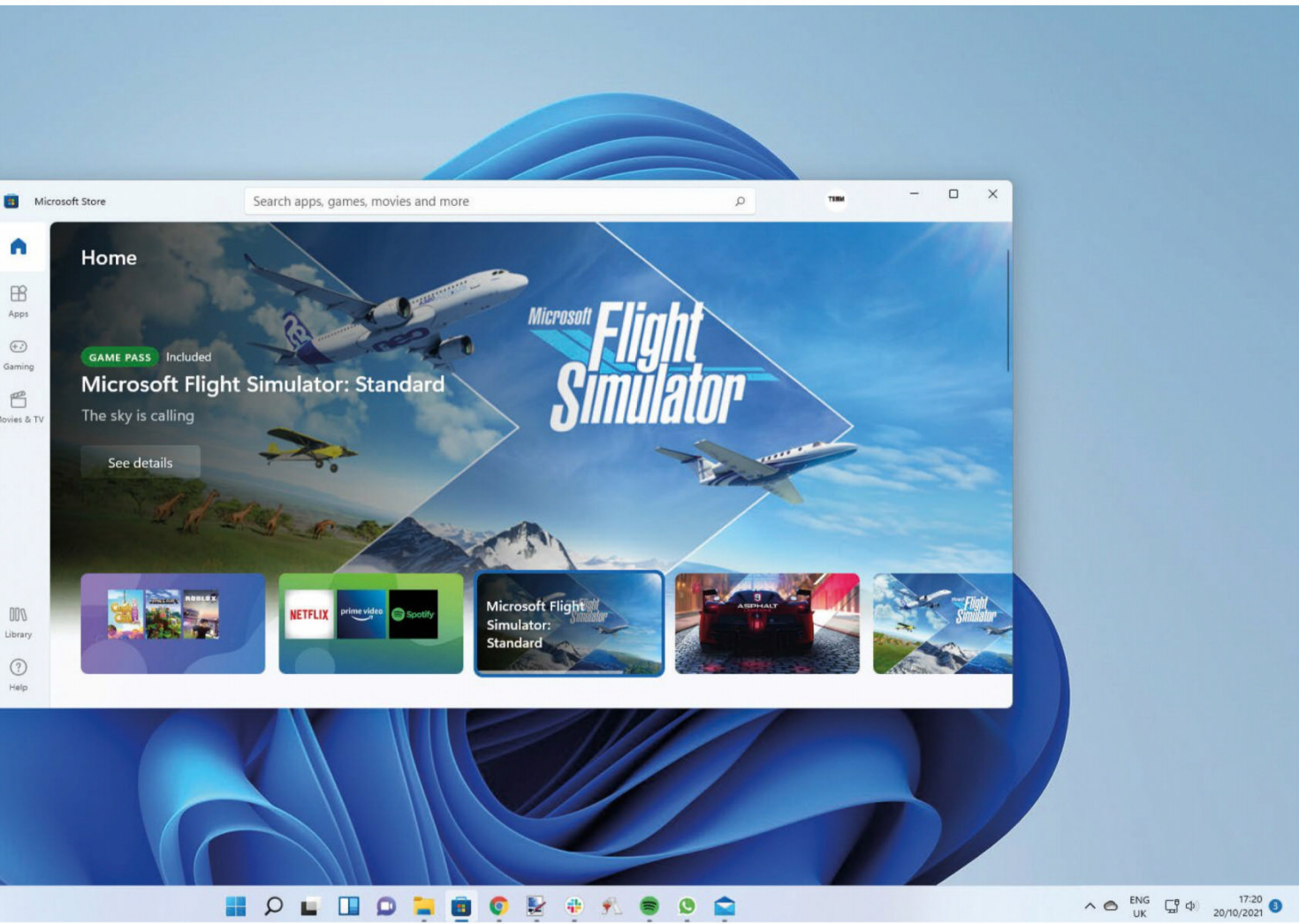
SMOOTH MOVES

The new centralised taskbar, rounded edges and colours evoke the same airy lightness as that classic Windows XP wallpaper; it almost feels like you're floating on clouds as you pop open the Start menu and the file explorer. Pretty soon you'll get used to the new aesthetic and then it'll just be business as usual. The bottom line is that the whole thing just feels a lot smoother.

And smooth is a good word for a lot of Windows 11 – it reflects almost everything that's good about it, like the new, far less jarring notification

pop-ups. Windows 11 has new sound effects, too, that are way more pleasant in general. It's as if for years computer sound effects have been designed with pure functional utility in mind, and then one day someone said, "Remember when we had Brian Eno compose the Windows 95 startup jingle, and it sounded nice? What if we tried to make things sound nice again?"

There are some useful new features below this bling too. The window snap feature lets you hover over the maximise button to choose from different ratios and arrangements, like a 70/30 split, which is really handy. If you use two monitors and turn your second one on while Windows 10 is running, the OS spends a few seconds basically seizing up before figuring out what to display where. In Windows 11, the desktop on your primary monitor zooms out for a couple of seconds to signify a display change is happening, and then it pops right back into place as the second monitor comes online.



ABOVE: The Microsoft Store has had a facelift, but you'll probably never use it anyway. Notice the rounded corners.

BELOW: Windows 11's pringle backgrounds are some abstract nonsense, but at least they make a change from Windows 10's boring effort.

The Start menu also looks nice and clean compared to the mess of tiles it was in Windows 10, though as a consequence it does end up feeling less functional. Why is the button you click to see more of your apps is so small? And why didn't Microsoft make it more customisable on the whole? The unspoken answer may be that the Start menu is nearly worthless when you can more quickly launch applications by pressing the Windows key and typing a couple of letters, but as it is now it feels like a half-thought-out redesign.

PROMISES, PROMISES

Aside from the new aesthetic, the few big features Microsoft talked about in its presentation this summer – especially

the ones to do with gaming – just aren't here yet. Things like support for DirectStorage and AutoHDR will be added later on. Game developers need to implement the DirectStorage API for it to work, which means on launch day this feature is going to do nothing for your gaming experience, even if you have the necessary speedy NVMe SSD. You'll need an HDR monitor to use AutoHDR as well, and even then we've yet to see what this will really look like on PC – although it has had some successes on the Xbox Series S/X.

PRETTY SOON YOU'LL GET USED TO THE NEW AESTHETIC

The good news is that upgrading to Windows 11 shouldn't unduly affect your gaming performance. We've benchmarked a range of games on different machines and have had surprisingly few issues. Only *Civilization VI*'s AI test was notably slower, with the Windows 11 coming in half a second slower than the Windows 10 run. Elsewhere, it's generally quicker. Though only slightly quicker. It has to be said that any performance differences have been within the margins of benchmarking error, so we can't necessarily give Microsoft the thumbs up to its claims of this being the best Windows ever for gaming.

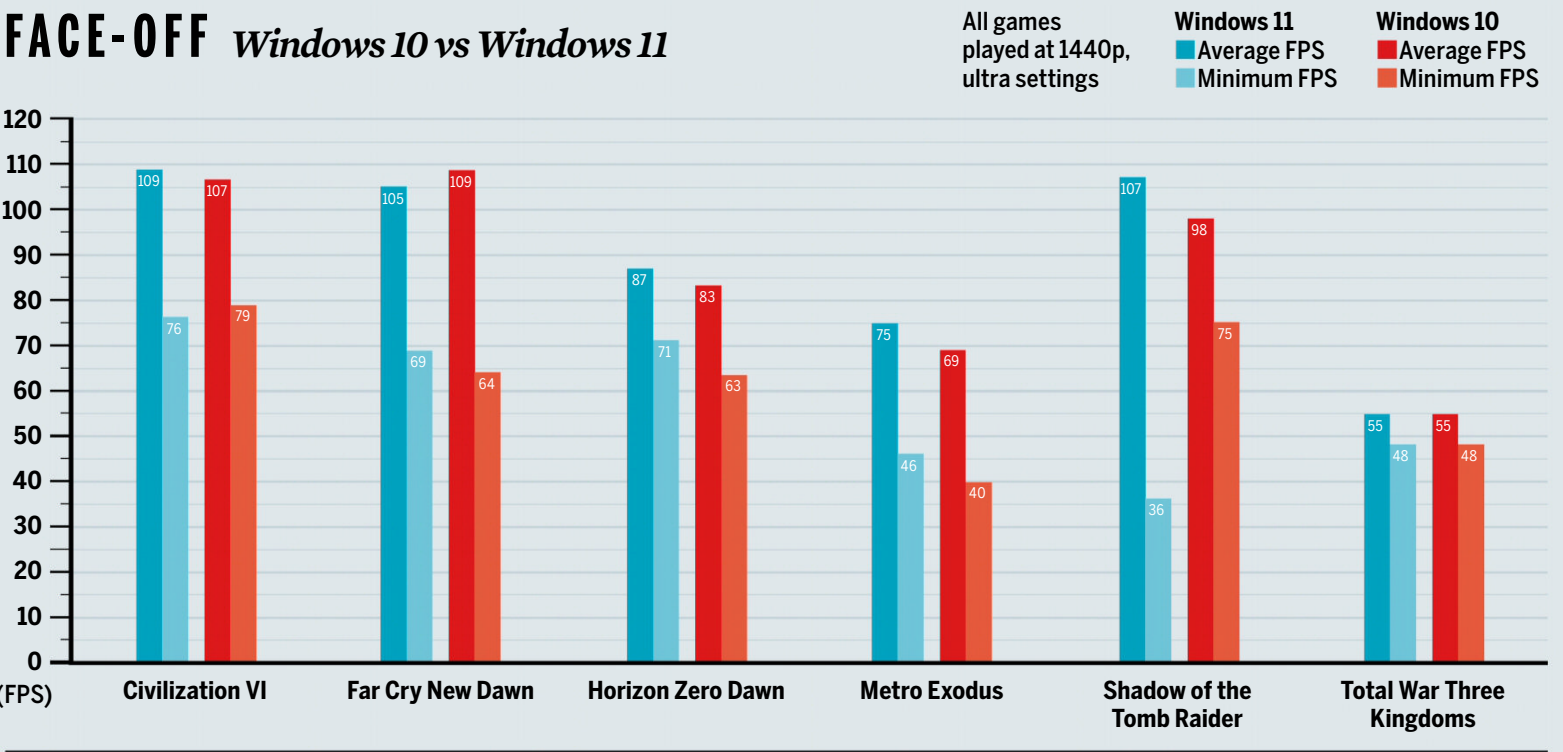
But it's not bad for gaming either. At this early point in an operating system's lifetime, relative frame rate stasis can definitely be counted as a win.

The long and short of it is: Right now Windows 11 is good, and it'll be even better when its first update arrives in a few months. But right now, this makeover isn't worth the potential hassle of installing it on your machine. Hold off until the first big update drops in spring, which will

bring with it the features we've been waiting for. By then there should be less teething problems, too. ■

Alan Dexter, Wes Fenlon, Dave James

FACE-OFF Windows 10 vs Windows 11



TEST RIG STATS CPU: INTEL CORE I7 10700K / MOTHERBOARD: MSI MPG Z490 GAMING CARBON WIFI / GRAPHICS CARD: NVIDIA RTX 3060 TI FOUNDERS EDITION / MEMORY: 32GB CORSAIR VENGEANCE RGB PRO DDR4-3200 / SSD: 1TB SK HYNIX GOLD P31 / COOLER: CORSAIR H100I RGB PRO XT / CHASSIS: DIMASTECH MINI V2 / OS: WINDOWS 11 BUILD 22000.194

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

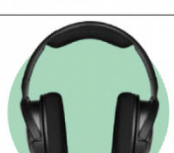
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Spire is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,182

MOTHERBOARD		MPG X570 Gaming Pro Carbon WiFi MSI £230 The MSI Gaming Pro Carbon isn't the most lavish X570 going but it's pretty darn close without the ludicrous price tag.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 5900X AMD £549 AMD's latest Zen 3 architecture cruises through the newest games and hands you plenty of cores for CPU-intensive workloads.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,600 Corsair £170 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £151 Western Digital is delivering PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850, making the most of that AMD Ryzen platform.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“An ambitious game that grapples with tough questions”

TALES OF ARISE is a resplendent JRPG with fantastic characters

From the very first cutscene, *Tales of Arise* makes it obvious that it's a JRPG that's grim and serious.

Sure, most RPGs involve some kind of nefarious villain who is up to no good, but *Tales of Arise* opens with a kid in a slave labour camp about to be whipped before a mysterious man in an iron mask intervenes and takes that beating on his behalf. What follows is an entire game about an enslaved planet rising up to fight back against the extraterrestrial humans who have oppressed them for three centuries. It's not exactly fun stuff, but that's what makes it good.

Tales of Arise is an ambitious game that grapples with tough questions even when it sometimes fails to find meaningful answers to them. There's

STEVEN MESSNER



THIS MONTH
Spent too long dressing up my characters.

ALSO PLAYED
Sable, Spelunky

an earnest honesty to it that I just don't find in a lot of other JRPGs.

That iron masked saviour ends up being Alphen, the protagonist who has predictably lost his memory but unpredictably cannot feel any pain whatsoever. He's a natural foil to Shionne, a fugitive cursed with magical thorns that wound anyone who touches her. But I'm equally enjoying secondary characters like Law, who struggles with the fact that his shitty father was also a beloved hero of the rebellion. All of these characters are united by the

TOP: *Tales of Arise* is bleak, but its characters are lovable.

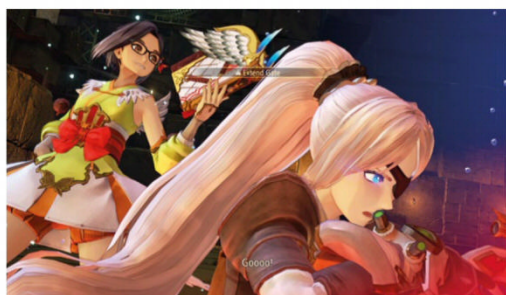
TOP RIGHT: Optional cutscenes really shed light on inter-party drama.

fact that, in some way, they've been slaves their entire life to a race of people from beyond their planet. Their only value is in the astral energy found in their bodies, which these oppressors want to harvest in a practice that's as pointless as it is unbelievably cruel.

TALL TALES

It's ugly stuff, but *Tales of Arise* strikes a balance by making its characters feel human. They're flawed, endearing, and surprisingly opinionated. It's rare that JRPGs have much interpersonal conflict between the party, but *Arise* is full of

TALES OF ARISE STRIKES A BALANCE BY MAKING ITS CHARACTERS FEEL HUMAN



optional cutscenes where characters bicker and question each other's motivations and allegiances. That really creates an uncommon sense of character growth as, over time, they learn to trust one another.

Weirdly enough, a lot of this internal growth is demonstrated by a character's outward appearance. Piece by piece, Alphen slowly dismantles his iron mask and reveals more of his face. But *Tales of Arise* also has a surprisingly deep fashion system wherein you can collect garments from owls hidden on every map and equip them to characters.

It might sound silly, but I've become obsessed with this feature because it's such a cool way of showing how my party is growing over time. Alphen started the story in tattered threads but is now sporting a suit of shiny black armour. Having this kind of freedom over the look of my characters is fun considering most JRPG heroes never change their clothes once (imagine how stinky they must be). Really, though, I think what's telling is that *Tales of Arise* has made me care so much about its characters that I've become a doting mother shouting for them to put a sweater on because it's cold outside. ■



The superb detail of the remaster does get lost at high resolutions.

“Sean Connery’s just been eaten by a dog”

Conquering a bunker in **RED ALERT: REMASTERED**

▶ JOHN STRIKE



THIS MONTH
Helped launch a comedy club.

ALSO PLAYED
Operation Flashpoint: CWC

No prompt in *Red Alert* fills a fan with dread like the words “Timer started”. Much of the satisfaction I get from strategy games comes from the long hauls – building an immaculate base, lining all of your tanks up before the final attack, and so on, but when the timed underground missions in *Red Alert* crop up, all luxuries are out of the window.

I've got 45 minutes on the clock to rush two sets of troops around underground soviet bunkers deactivating missile silos. This being *C&C*, the map is of course completely black with fog of war, and these condensed missions are as much about visibility as they are combat.

My southern-most group include a spy, the not-so-subtle parody of James Bond in full dinner jacket and dicky tie. He sounds the same as he always did, but the crispness of the *Remastered* version is so staggering I swear I can see his cufflinks.

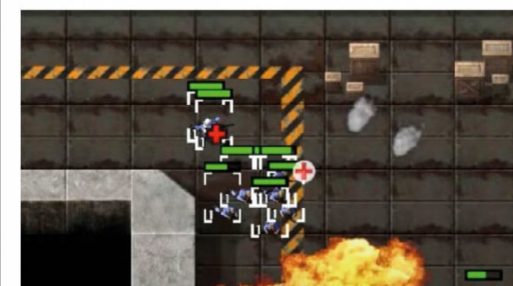
Despite just being a man in a dinner jacket, he's somehow invisible to everyone except German Shepherds, so I send him on through the tunnel to scout ahead. He replies

with his classic Sean Connery “Yesh shir, on my way” and off he goes.

The bunker is maze of tunnels littered with soldiers, explosive barrels, weird floor markings, and flame turrets that turn infantry into sizzling fireballs. Despite the hazards, the timer always keeps me moving, usually with the Spy front and centre.

THE WORLD IS NOT A WOOF

After dozens of saves and loads, the mission is nearly over, both groups have rendezvoused, but I've only got two soldiers, one engineer, and the spy left. As we reach the final room we're faced with an attack dog, a hefty group of soviets, and a flame turret, and although neatly lined up next to explosive barrels the only way to detonate the turret is to rush your engineer to a side panel to press the trigger. Realising I have to get the engineer past, I make the tough decision to sacrifice the spy to the German Shepherd. The spy lets out his final “For king and country” as he's unceremoniously mauled to death whilst the engineer blows the turret to smithereens. As the mission ends I realise I've essentially just watched Sean Connery get eaten by a dog, in hi-res. ■



“A world where you use your camera to discover lots of little surprises”

Switching up perspectives in photography game **TOEM**

Toem, by Swedish studio Something We Made, is not your usual photography adventure. Games like *Pokémon Snap*, *Umurangi Generation*, and *Bugsnax*, are all in first-person perspective, with the viewpoint of the character's eye-line and camera's lens lined up with each other.

But in *Toem* this relationship is completely different. When using your camera to take a quick snap it's in first-person perspective, but the rest of the game is played from an isometric point of view. The result is a totally unique kind of photography game that lets you see the same world but in two completely different ways. It's a great idea, and one *Toem* uses to create interesting puzzles that combine exploration and hidden-object mechanics.

The goal here is to help your cutesy *Toem* character to complete a quest given to them by their grandma – to climb a snowy mountain and photograph something called the ‘toem’. To get to the icy peak, you'll need to journey through a string of

▶ RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Took a photo of the Fish King that was very majestic.

ALSO PLAYED
Eastward, *Life is Strange: True Colours*

themed cities and towns, helping locals with their photographic needs. Requests can range from a girl scout asking you to take pictures of bugs, a bear requesting you to snap the perfect photo of its fantastical tree hotel, or cheering up a sad skeleton by snapping their portrait – all goofy diversions and utterly charming.

Most of the requests are pretty easy, but the more puzzling ones will need your perspective-switching skills to look in every nook and cranny. Solutions to puzzles might be hidden underneath bridges, or in between the slats of stairs. *Toem* is a

world where you use your camera to discover lots of little surprises.

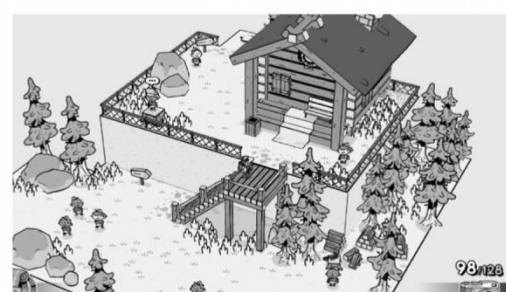
PICTURE PERFECT

The game encourages you to take your time to stop and look at the world and I always found that if a local's request was too ambiguous, looking through the camera's viewpoint for a fresh perspective would always help me find the answer. You don't need to complete every quest to move to the next location, so if you can't figure a puzzle out it's no biggie, but *Toem's* characters are so silly and lovable that it fuelled me to finish every possible task.

If you just want a break from quests altogether, *Toem's* cartoon-y black and white world is just a joy to wander around and explore, free from pressure and time limits. The soundtrack is also excellent, with plenty of pleasant music tracks to ease you into the game's cozy vibe.

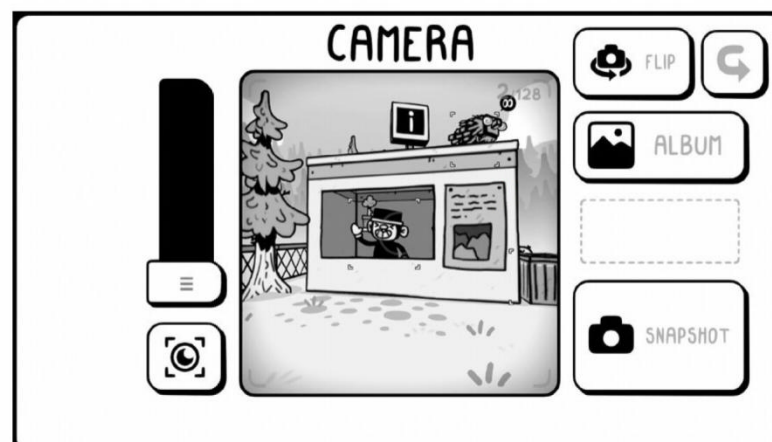
Toem clocks in at around the three-hour mark, making it the perfect bite-sized indie to snuggle under a duvet and complete in one sitting. It certainly left me feeling warm and fuzzy. ■

SOLUTIONS TO PUZZLES MIGHT BE HIDDEN UNDERNEATH BRIDGES



FAR LEFT: Folks in *Toem* aren't camera shy.

BELOW: This neighbour gave me a pair of clogs, which I wore for a full two minutes.





There are three worlds in *Phogs*, themed around food, bedtime, and the seaside.

“Small children and slapstick go together like a coyote and a cliff”

Finding felicitous family fun in **PHOGS!**

Phogs is possibly the greatest game ever made, provided your criteria for greatest game is ‘suitable for playing with a five-year-old’. I’ve been playing PC games with my daughter since she was two, but thus far it’s mostly been me playing while she sits on my knee.

Now that she’s five, she’s begun to want to play the games herself, which is good because the blood supply to my lower leg has been sorely diminished of late. Yet while tons of games are technically suitable for ages 3+, that rating only applies to themes and content. It doesn’t apply to things like ‘attention span’ or ‘hand-eye coordination’, both of which are still developing at my daughter’s age.

Phogs, however, feels like it was tailor made for playing with young children. It’s a game in which you play as a dog with two heads and no limbs exploring a hyper-saturated series of magical islands, solving puzzles, and collecting golden bones.

▶ RICK LANE



THIS MONTH
Taught a small child how to lead cute animals to their doom

ALSO PLAYED
Donut County, *The Eternal Cylinder*

The game’s colourful world and gentle themes are perfect for the 3-7 bracket, but equally important is how the game is played and structured. It’s a cooperative game, with each player controlling one head of the phogs. The controls for each head are extremely simple. You can move around in four directions and bite things to grab hold of them. On top of this is the ability to mutually stretch the phogs’ shared body like a giant rubber band – less of a sausage dog and more of a reticulated python dog.

NO COMBAT OR OTHER OBSTACLES THAT REQUIRE PRECISE MOVEMENTS

BIT OF A STRETCH

The three abilities are used to solve puzzles. For example, the phogs’ body can act like a hosepipe. Attach one head to a water outlet, and the water will spray out of the other.

Crucially, there’s no way to fail in *Phogs*. There are no tricky jumping puzzles, no combat or other obstacles that require quick or precise movements –perfect for kids.

Phogs may be simple, but it isn’t insipid. The puzzles have enough meat to them to make them engaging for an adult, while the stretching mechanic and the base concept of two players controlling one character is novel and fun. You will constantly be dragged to places you don’t want to go, but as anyone who has been to a soft play on a Saturday morning will know, this is a staple of parenthood.

All told, *Phogs* is the best parent/child gaming experience that I’ve had so far. It’s cute and accessible while also being novel and genuinely interesting. A few of the puzzles are probably too complicated for a small child to solve on their own, but that’s what dads are for. ■



STELLARIS

Making old aliens new again. *By Leana Hafer*

Like all of Paradox's grand strategy games, *Stellaris* has received a space freighter full of DLC and free updates since its release over five years ago. From huge expansions that significantly change how you play, like *Apocalypse* and *Megacorp*, to smaller, story-focused packs like *Leviathans* and *Ancient Relics*, you could spend about £150 all told if you're too impatient to wait for a sale. But with September's *Lem* update, they're trying something a little different: adding new content to old DLC.

It makes sense if you think about it. You spent money on the base game, which continually gets updated, rebalanced, and injected full of free features. You also spent money on the DLC packs, so why shouldn't they get the same treatment to increase their value going forward? This round of sprucing up mainly targeted two somewhat lackluster offerings: the *Plantoids Species Pack* and the *Humanoids Species Pack*.

Species packs in *Stellaris* add a new set of 3D ships and space stations, city art, and a bunch of alien portraits you can use to customise your empire. *Plantoids* is flora-themed, featuring battleships with leafy motifs and a collection of flowery, bark-covered, and pistil-packing species. *Humanoids* could be

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2016

DEVELOPER
Paradox

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
paradoxplaza.com

called the 'rubber forehead pack', with a ship set clearly inspired by *Star Trek* and homages to Klingons and Vulcans – but also some portraits appropriate to classic fantasy races like dwarves and elves. On release, though, these packs were entirely visual. Your tree men and not-Romulans don't actually play any differently from other kinds of aliens.

With the *Lem* update, a selection of new civics have been unlocked for owners of these packs that let you lean into the fantasies they present with appropriate mechanics. You can finally make a photosynthetic race – they still need some food, but half of their nutritional requirements are fulfilled by energy credits instead. The *Humanoids Species Pack* now grants access to the Clone Army origin, allowing you to play as a race of short-lived, militaristic clones (clearly inspired by the Republic army from the *Star Wars* prequels) who can only reproduce artificially.

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

And that's not all. Your plantoid empire can now use Catalytic Processing, which uses organic matter (represented as food) to create

durable alloys used in warships and other military constructions, which normally requires you to refine minerals. This allows you to focus on agriculture over industry and not fall behind in terms of fleet strength. Humanoids can pick up Masterful Crafters, which the devs say is custom made for your space dwarf fantasies, which replaces the vanilla Artisan job with Artificers who are more productive, additionally generating trade value and engineering research for your empire.

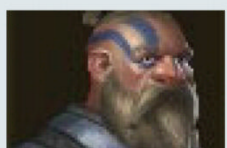
This is all part of what Paradox is calling the 'Custodian Initiative', a new team that will be responsible for putting out smaller updates at a quicker pace for *Stellaris*. They're

YOUR PLANTOID EMPIRE CAN NOW USE CATALYTIC PROCESSING

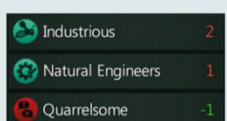
aiming to give us players something new to point our scanners at about every three months, though not every update will be as ambitious in scope as *Lem*. Among other things, they want to continue looking back at older DLCs to add additional value to them.

Plantoids and Humanoids weren't the only empire types that got some love. Rogue Servitors, which are basically robots who look after their pampered, lazy organic creators, can now build Sanctuary Arcologies to house even greater teeming masses of useless, ungrateful organics. Necroids with the Reanimators civic can now bring back slain space dragons as zombie space dragons. And for everyone, the Traditions system that lets you evolve your empire over the centuries has been totally reworked. There are now more Traditions than there are Tradition slots, meaning you won't be able to get all of them. Previously, it was just a matter of which order you took them in, so everyone would have basically the same bonuses by the endgame.

The *Lem* update is out now, and while there's no new DLC to go along with it, you'll be getting access to new stuff for owning the *Plantoids Species Pack*, *Humanoids Species Pack*, *Lithoids Species Pack*, *Necroids Species Pack*, *Synthetic Dawn*, *Apocalypse*, *Megacorp*, *Ancient Relics*, and *Nemesis*. ■



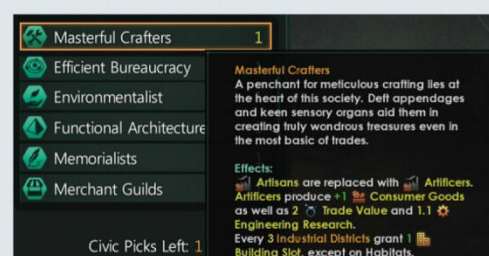
1. Pick this portrait.



2. Add some dwarf traits like Industrious, Natural Engineers, and Quarrelsome.

DIGGY DIGGY BLACK HOLE

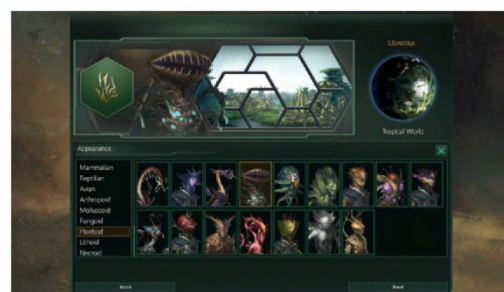
How to make a space dwarf empire



3. Pick up the Masterful Crafters Civic (Mining Guilds and Functional Architecture are great, too!)



4. For an added twist of reclaiming your ancient mines from the cold earth, try the Remnants origin!



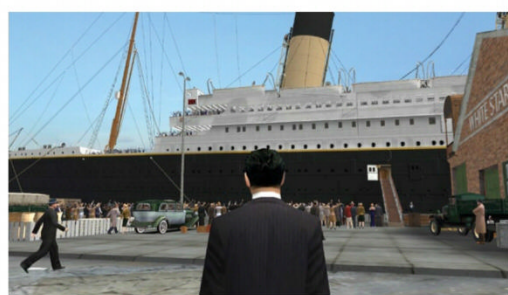
ABOVE: Dwarven space stations are built to last and smell like a frat house.

FAR LEFT: The leaves aren't actually solar panels. We just thought they looked rad.

LEFT: The Little Shop of Horrors is now a galactic franchise.



This looks kinda familiar...



ABOVE: The dinner rush.

We definitely don't need a bigger boat.

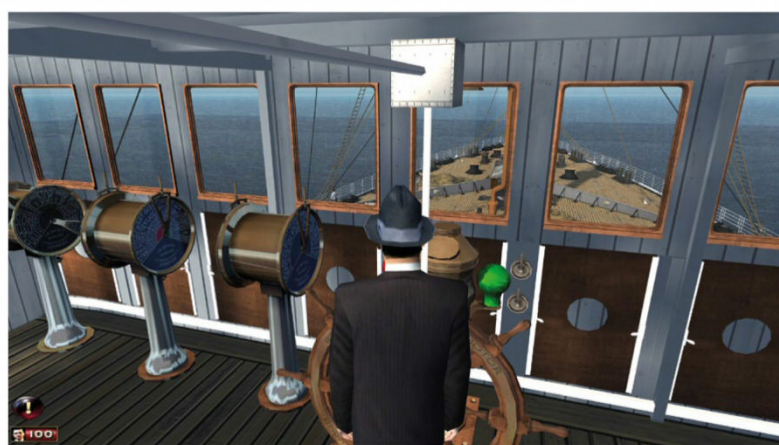


MAFIA TITANIC MOD

Trade larceny for luxury. *By Christopher Livingston*



BELOW: It's nice being a gangster.



As mods go, they don't get much bigger or more ambitious than this one: a full recreation of the RMS Titanic... and it's a mod for *Mafia*. In 1912 the Titanic was the biggest passenger ship ever built and, as I'm guessing you're aware, it sank on its first voyage from England to New York. There was a pretty major movie about it in 1997 (but there was a far better movie about it in 1958).

Of all the games to add the Titanic to, I never would have guessed *Mafia* would be a good fit, but it really is. The full-conversion mod project has been underway for more than a decade, and it's important to note it's not finished. The version I played was just part one of an even bigger planned mod. But what's there is playable, and if you enjoy *Mafia* or just want to explore a beautiful and impressive recreation of the Titanic, this is a mod you should absolutely try, even in its unfinished state.

The *Mafia Titanic Mod* comes with a custom storyline (also not yet finished), and it begins not with an ocean voyage but with a test of your driving skills. Your mafia don wants to transport an expensive car on the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 29, 2002

DEVELOPER
Illusion Softworks

PUBLISHER
Gathering of Devs

LINK
bit.ly/3pDgxNO

Titanic and sell it overseas, so before you can climb on board the historic ship you've first got to drive there. And you'll need to be careful. The old timey car can't take too much damage and neither can you or your passengers. If you're a *Mafia* veteran, you know the cops won't put up with you speeding or running red lights,

EXPLORE A BEAUTIFUL RECREATION OF THE TITANIC

either. So drive carefully and buckle up, because it's quite a lengthy trip.

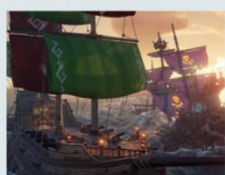
UNDER THE SEA

In fact, after carefully navigating a countryside map and entering the city, I got a bit lost. I guess I've been a bit spoiled by years of games giving me a constantly updated GPS route and navigation markers all over my map. But here I had very little idea of where to go. The country map provided some floating green arrows showing me where to turn, but when we got downtown I had to bring up the in-game map and just drive around enough for it to show me where the Titanic was berthed. Clever me: I figured it would be somewhere along the coast.

There's a bit of educational value in the mod, too. One of the mafia pipsqueaks in the car dished out a fun fact about the Titanic. "That's a

ALL ABOARD!

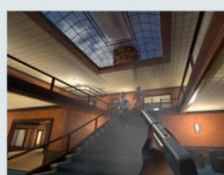
Other great games that take place on a ship



SEA OF THIEVES
The only thing better than your creaky, leaky pirate ship is the beautiful water.



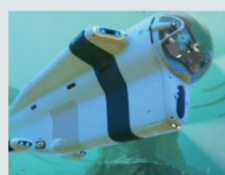
ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG
Your crew even sings sea shanties to you!



THE SHIP
It's not a fancy cruise unless someone gets mysteriously murdered, right?



FAR: LONE SAILS
It may be a landship, but it's got a sail and more personality than entire fleets.



SUBNAUTICA
Submarines count, right? We certainly love spending time on ours.

» big ship!” he exclaimed. And, of course, it is. After parking and having the car loaded aboard, I stood there just looking at it for a while, watching the crowd on board and the crowd on the dock waving excitedly at each other. As for me, I won’t be travelling in steerage like some common Jack Dawson. I have a first-class ticket, so I’ll be riding in style.

Me and a fellow mafia goon climbed on board and were told to locate our rooms on B deck. It took quite a while to find them, because this floating hotel is massive. But every deck is nicely marked and we eventually wandered into the right set of corridors. Once inside the room, I admired my classy quarters, then found a suitcase in the closet that let me change outfits. Suit and top-hat? Pajamas? Old-timey swimming costume? I can take my pick. And since I’m in the mob and all, I also have an even bigger suitcase full of guns to choose from. Well, maybe I’ll play with those later.

Some cutscenes show the ship leaving port, and once again it’s driven home: this is a massive ship. I know there are bigger ships than the Titanic in the world these days, but jeez. This ship is an absolute unit.

From there I was free to explore and partake in a few different activities. And honestly, the only real activity I needed for about an hour of playtime was just walking around, exploring the Titanic, and gawping at just about everything I saw. It’s a really astounding recreation. The elegant, sweeping stairways, the corridors that seem to go on forever, the classy parlours filled with dapper gents and a smoky haze from cigars, the massive and crowded dining rooms, the outdoor walkways that let you amble along from the stern to the bow. It’s seriously impressive and looks amazingly accurate. I can see why the mod has taken so much time to go from idea to reality.

After quite a lot of wandering, and sometimes just finding a spot to sit and stare for a while, I eventually walked to the very front of the ship. I had to do it, right? Unfortunately, my

‘King of the World’ moment wasn’t quite as exciting as it could have been. I sort of just stood there. I did spot another passenger near the bow of the ship, and he was wearing a flat cap. Is that Jack? Could be Jack. Either way, I punched him a few times. That’s for becoming a permanent fixture in our collective pop-culture consciousness, jerk!

While the mod is still unfinished and once you’re onboard there are no more story elements to play with, there’s actually a lot on the ship that works. To have dinner, I first needed to make a reservation with a desk clerk on a certain deck. After dinner, I had a glass of scotch in the parlour, sitting amongst the other fancy blokes. There’s a pool down belowdecks, and I paddled around in it for a bit in my swimming costume, then poked around and found an attendant who offered to wash me. It was weird, but I accepted – I’ve been trained by *Red Dead Redemption* never to turn down the offer of a personal bathing attendant. I also climbed into some contraption that looked like an iron lung but I assume was some sort of personal sauna. It seemed like every door I stuck my head through on the ship had something interesting behind it. I even sat down and played the piano for a bit, and a fellow walked up and danced a little. When I finished, a small crowd had gathered and gave me a little applause.

I wandered up to the front of the ship again and this time found the fellow steering it. It’s hard not to want to steer the Titanic myself, so I punched him a few times and he ran off. I couldn’t turn the ship around, but I was able to blow the massive ship’s horn, which is maybe the loudest horn I’ve ever heard in a game. It was fun! Just for kicks, I punched the captain, too, but he promptly pulled out a revolver and shot me. I guess he’s a little on edge, and it’s tough to blame him.

FLOAT ON

Since I was punching innocent people anyway, I figured I might as

well go full mafia psycho, so I went back to my cabin and loaded up on guns. It does feel a bit grim to be shooting up a ship full of people about to experience an absolutely horrific tragedy, but don’t you worry. These Titanic passengers aren’t going to sit there helplessly while you go ham on them. Some fled, screaming, but I was rushed by a whole crowd of angry passengers, who pummelled

IT’S SERIOUSLY IMPRESSIVE AND LOOKS VERY ACCURATE

me mercilessly. Even the members of the Titanic’s band rushed me and started beating on me with their violins. That’s a tough little orchestra.

In fact, I didn’t last long no matter how many weapons I brought to the party. Part of it is the clunky aiming in the 19-year-old game, but most of it is just that NPCs have no interest in putting up with random violence from a mafia goon without dishing out some justice of their own.

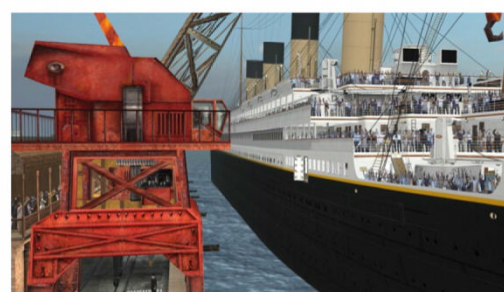
I gave up on the guns pretty quickly and without any second thoughts. The Titanic is a perfect pleasure to experience without running around and shooting up the joint. The mod is highly detailed and as much as I walked around its various decks, talking to people when I could, and interacting with its various activities, I’m sure I didn’t even come close to seeing everything that’s there. It’s a massive place.

Like I said, the *Mafia Titanic Mod* is far from being complete. It’s mostly a sandbox. Part two of the mod will add more finished areas of the ship’s interior. Part 3 will feature the actual sinking of the Titanic, which I am definitely interested in experiencing. And Part four will deal with what comes after. If you decide to try the mod, just keep all that in mind. I certainly can’t wait to try it again when it’s finished. It’s already a mod to remember. ■

TAKING STOCK

You think your inventory is full? Here’s some of what the Titanic carried around

6,600	25,000	40,000	10,000	44,000	17,000	2
tons of coal	pounds of poultry	fresh eggs	lightbulbs	pieces of cutlery	bottles of booze	libraries



FAR LEFT: A little light entertainment.

LEFT: Hope nobody paid for a round-trip ticket.



I'm king of the world! Hoot hoot!



BUY A NEW WORLD HOUSE

Claim your corner of Aeternum and make Amazon's MMO home. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Variable

VITAL LINKS

PvP help:
bit.ly/3mtUqpV

Leveling tips:
bit.ly/3ivZWap

Server updates:
bit.ly/3Ffe5h6



HOUSE HUNTING

1 To buy property you'll need to be at least level 15, have five thousand or more coins, and be Territory Standing level ten or higher. That buys you a basic house. But the question is, how do you get all that? Let the rest of our guide show you the way...



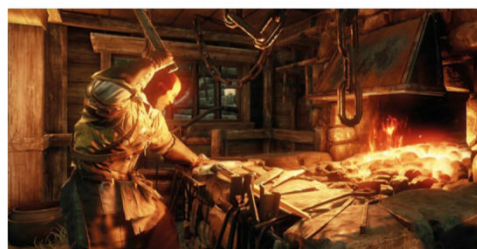
TWO BIRDS

2 Climb those early levels fast by focusing on main quests, as they dole out the most XP. But don't ignore side activities – make sure they're pinned to your HUD and tick them off if they're nearby or on the way to your next major task.



PUB CRAWL

3 Without mounts, travelling is a drag. Fast travel costs precious Azoth, which you'll want to keep for crafting, so register at an inn to zip back to it for free. You can only sign up at one at a time and it's on a one-hour cooldown, though, so make it count.



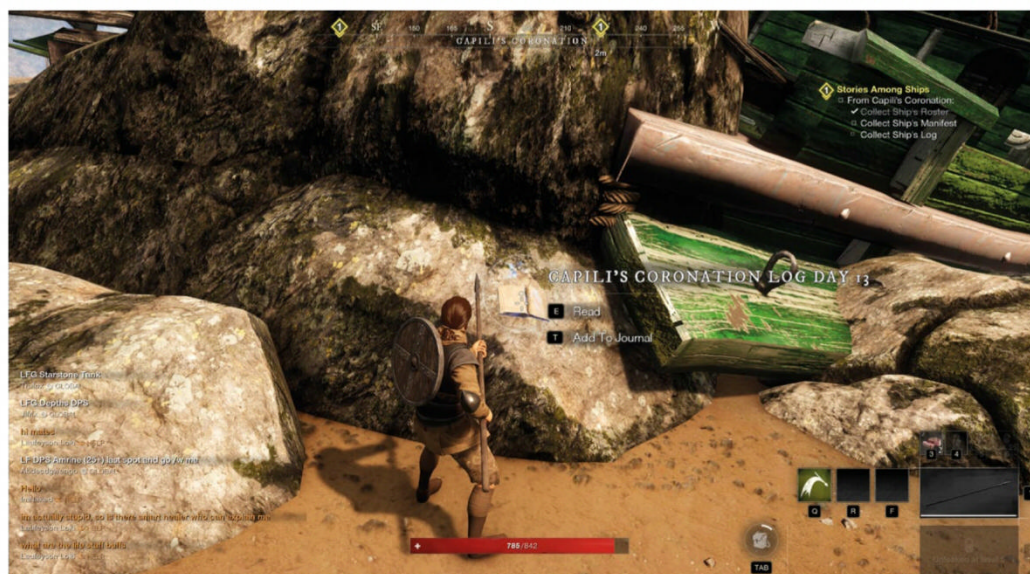
SNOOZE WORLD

4 Leaving Aeternum after enduring the server queues can feel frustrating, but please get some actual sleep at some point. When you do, sign out from a settlement to take advantage of the small XP boost from the Well Rested bonus.



MORE ORDERS

5 Early in the main quest you'll join a faction (see more on the next page). The first three faction missions you complete each day give you a decent XP bonus, so it pays to help out your colleagues now and again.



THE HISTORY BOYS

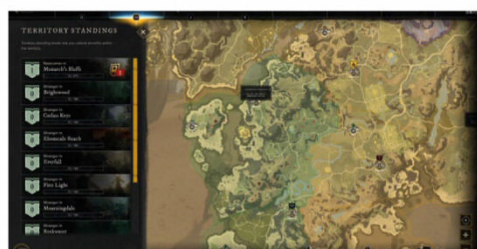
6 Look out for little pieces of paper highlighted in a bright blue light: these are lore pages. Not only will they flesh out the story of your new home a bit more, but you'll bag some experience in the process.



TURF WAR

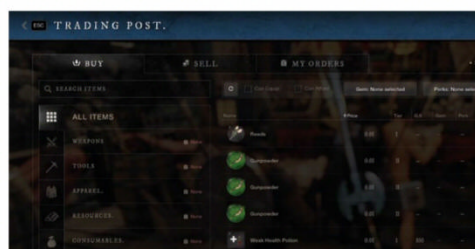
7 Speaking of minor XP bumps, flagging yourself for PvP combat while out in the world boosts your experience gains by a welcome five percent. The perpetual battles over territory in Aeternum are worth joining, too, so get stuck in.

ATTACK THE BLOG *Meet the three factions of New World*



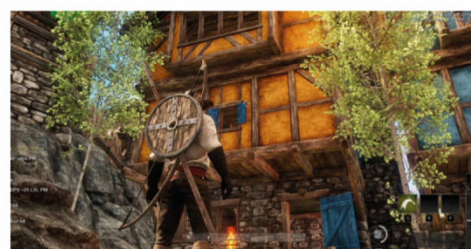
STAND-UP GUY

8 Since you're looking for XP and Territory Standing to secure your lovely new abode, it's handy that generating both goes hand in hand. Complete quests, craft items, close Corruption Breaches, and more to gain Territory Standing in your region.



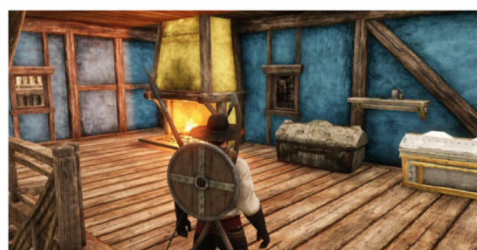
WHEELER DEALER

9 The final piece of the property puzzle is coins. You get these from completing quests, but you can also amass cash by selling items in shops. The thing is, the economy is entirely player-run, so you can't sell any old junk.



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

10 Once you've satisfied all the conditions on a basic house, it's time to choose your spot. Your choice is limited without more grinding, but your property at least functions at a free fast travel point. There remains a cooldown timer, though.



HOME MAKEOVER

11 Now it's time to make a house a home. Do that by adding furniture, which you can craft or buy from shops. Even better, look out for decorations that bestow passive buffs to skills like crafting and weapon damage.



IRONY MAN

12 Though none of your property boons will work if you don't pay your dues. Fail to pay your taxes and you don't lose your house, but it'll no longer offer buffs or act as a free fast travel point.



FIGHTING A HORDE WITH SIX WIZARDS IN ICEWIND DALE II

I'm banning swords and embracing a mage-only lifestyle.

By Jeremy Peel

Fighter. Rogue. Healer. Mage. This is the archetypal role-playing party, the quadrumvirate that guarantees a good time no matter the setting. It is balanced, broad, and allows you to see as much of the spectrum of adventuring as possible – brute forcing your way into tombs, deactivating their traps, and parsing the strange scrolls found within.

OK, so you deviate from the norm occasionally; maybe you've got a couple of slots left over and pick a bard for comic relief, or a monk, because you're keen to learn the combat function of a smoothly shaved head. But when was the last time you delved into a dungeon with a properly wonky line-up? What was the last RPG you completed with, for instance, six wizards?

Icewind Dale II is the snow-tipped hill on which I've chosen to die. It has no developer-made companions, so you're free to build an entire party from scratch right at the beginning of the game. From GOG.com I download not only the game, but also the full manual and Book of Spells. I'm going to need them.

Next, though, comes the backstory. *Icewind Dale II* is set in the Forgotten Realms, and the most famous mages in Faerûn are the Red Wizards of Thay. Hailing from the Unapproachable East, they are the notoriously bad-natured ruling class of a populous and cruel country built on slavery.

When the Red Wizards have appeared in other games, they've generally had red rings encircling their feet to mark them out as enemies. They don't exactly help themselves when it comes to public relations: these are the types you find holding dark rituals in the middle of the woods, or belligerently pursuing vulnerable women with innate magical abilities in order to dissect and study them. Their most notable videogame emissary – the haughty *Baldur's Gate* companion Edwin – would have been voted 'most likely to fatally turn on his own party' when leaving wizard school.

But we're going to turn them into protagonists. Our group is to be a mixture of researchers and imperialists – the former sifting the Spine of the World for arcane treasures that could bolster Thay's power, and the latter scouting the Dale's defences as the prelude to an

invasion. If anybody asks, though, they're simple merchants and archeologists.

IN THE WEEDS

Traditionally, the Thayan council had a representative from every D&D school of magic, so we'll try to do the same with our party. Up front are Whambam Mam and Thrul Ovvshytt, a conjurer and transmuter respectively. In close combat terms, wizards are essentially PhD students in pyjamas – but these two compensate for their weedy physiques with summoned weapons and physical transformation.

They're backed up by two ranged specialists. One, an

THESE ARE THE TYPES YOU FIND HOLDING DARK RITUALS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WOODS

old and bearded evoker named Zzimmerfram, will bring the magic missiles and lightning bolts. The other, who goes by Ichadad Bod, is an enchanter trained in mind manipulation – perfect for goblin crowd control.

The party is rounded out by Kul Anthurgangg, an illusionist I hope can stand in for a rogue, and Szass Quatch, a necromancer. The Red Wizards don't ever leave the house without a necromancer. That's just part and parcel of being evil.

The six of them set sail up the Sword Coast from Luskan, answering the call for adventurers to counter goblin attacks in the Ten Towns. By the time they get there, however, there are just nine towns remaining – Bremen is burning, and most of the mercenaries sent to help have been slaughtered on their ships during an ambush. Unfortunately, that includes the escort of fearsome Thayan gladiators, clerics, and knights that should have kept our wizards out of harm's way once they alighted in *Icewind Dale*. Our pyjama party will have to fend for itself.

To begin with, that goes rather well. Against the scrimshaw-and-snow backdrop of the town of Targos, the bright yellow goblins stand out a mile. Every time

one sidles into view, I slam the spacebar to pause the action, then leisurely peruse my party's menu of prepared spells. An ice dagger? Don't mind if I do. Chromatic orb? Would be rude not to.

Quickly, though, the well of mana runs dry. More than once, we have to trudge back to the ship we rode in on and sheepishly ask the captain if he minds us having a nap beneath his boards. Targos burns to the ground while the Red Wizards get their heads down for the recommended eight hours, replenishing their spell bank in the process.

BEWARE-HOUSE

A local soldier, Brogan, tells us a goblin force has seized a warehouse at the docks, which piques the interest of the party. If we clear it,

THE RULES

1. Build the whole party out of a single spellcasting class.

2. Pursue magical power in the name of the Red Wizards.

3. Don't take any crap from fighters. They're no longer needed.





» we'll get a free look at the trading goods – some potentially magical – transported into Targos. But we could do with some brawny backup to take the blows for us. We head to the pub to rouse a mercenary trio, the Iron Collar Company, but they sneer in our faces. “Who the hells do you think ye are,” says the one called Black Geoffrey, “butting into my tale while I’m sharing a tankard with my friends?” We’re on our own.

Brogan seems worried. “You might want to keep wounded members of your party – or, uh, wizards – outside the warehouse while the rest of your band storms the place,” he says. “One arrow can drop a man before he even knows the archer is there.”

“Hmm,” replies Whambam. “Sound advice. Still, we wizards are a lot stronger than we appear.”

When Whambam opens his palms to greet the first wave of goblins, flames emerge. Szass Quatch takes the opposite approach, chilling her hands to lethally low temperatures and playing ‘frostbite tag’ with the panicked enemy archer. Our reward for victory is a buffet of shipping crates and containers, which yields a smattering of darts and crossbows, plus one dead cat, which we take, because no self-respecting necromancer turns their nose up at a fresh body.

Then we find a ladder, at the bottom of which are some caves, stuffed with more goblins. This is D&D, after all, and there’s no such thing as a ground floor dungeon. For a little while, Kul Anthurrgang’s illusions work like a charm, literally – turning some of the monsters against their pals. But as our spellbook thins once more, the fight starts to flow in the other direction. A tough blighter in black armour, named Rukworm, sticks Whambam in the chest with a rusty blade – killing him instantly. At least the red won’t show on his robes.

RED DEAD

After a quick reload, it’s back to the boat for a kip. They say a rest is as good as a change, and so it proves when we hit the warehouse tunnels with an overwhelming barrage of fireworks. Once Rukworm is down, we bring the battle to some nearby kegs, as retribution for our snubbing at the hands of the drunken Iron Collar Company. Out of one smashed barrel falls a charred scroll which, annoyingly, not one wizard among our number can

CRIMSON KINGS

Anatomy of a Red Wizard of Thay



1 CLOAK

Cloaks are for professional and personal wear. Any colour’s fine, so long as it’s red.

2 EXPRESSION

Cruel and unaccommodating, in keeping with the prevailing national mood of Thay.

3 HANDS

Used for raising the dead and drawing tattoos. Really: they’re tattoo artists.

identify. But Brogan suggests the mayor’s wife can – she’s a powerful elven mage, apparently. We set off to find her, hoping this piece of paper will be the starting point for a collection of rare magicks.

Elytharra, famed for her supposed kindness, happily takes 100 gold pieces from the party in exchange for a glance over the goblin scroll. Turns out it’s an exhausted teleportation spell, now useless. The Red Wizards are fuming. Until, that is, Elytharra mentions it’s likely one of a pair – used to fast-travel a subject from one location to another. Somebody, it seems, has teleported the goblins into the caves beneath the docks. That

somebody is a mage, a traitor to the town, and probably still nearby. It’s time for us to find the culprit, and steal their magic items.

“If you have come to aid Targos, I would be pleased to pass along what arcane knowledge I can,” says Elytharra. “Uh... sure,” says Whambam. “The defence of Targos and all that. What kind of magic do you have?”

Elytharra’s shop shelves are stacked with strange scrolls, most of which we can’t afford. But we do splash out on Dispel Magic, suspecting there to be a rival wizard up ahead. Old Zzimerfram, however, fails to copy the scroll to his spellbook – presumably breaking his pencil. Now we’re skint, and no more powerful for our spent coin. It’s harsh, this wizarding life.

This gnome has a habit of crash-landing his airship in *Icewind Dale* games.





There's a mod for modern resolutions, but you'll need a big screen to make out the text.

WITH EXTRA SPELL SLOTS PER REST, OUR ARSENAL PRACTICALLY DOUBLES

Two doors down we find Phaen of the Rags, who gives up his beggar act when he sees our teleportation scroll. It's his, and he wants it back – but if there's one thing a Red Wizard won't do, it's part with magic.

MAGE ENGAGE

With Whambam buffed up by Mage Armour and Mirror Image spells, and a summoned beetle blocking most of the melee room, the mages in the gallery are free to bombard Phaen and his goblin mates with frost and magic missiles. The traitor responds in kind, knocking half the party unconscious with a single Sleep spell – laying them out on the hut's stone floor like a red carpet. But a firebomb finally does for our rival. This town isn't big enough for seven wizards on a secret mission.

Phaen's rags turn out to be lined with bear fur, and magically light. Whambam puts them on, reasoning their cold protection will come in handy the next time Zzimmerfram gets tasty with an ice dagger and its splash damage. Then, wonder of wonders: everybody levels up. We don't get any new spells – we'll have to find, buy

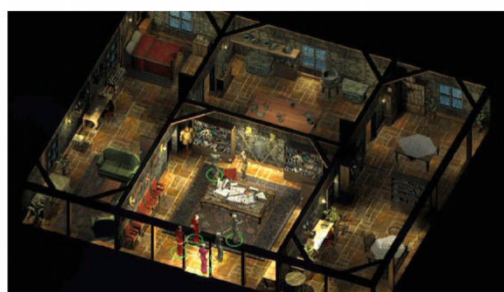
and copy those down – but with extra spell slots per rest, our arsenal practically doubles in size overnight.

Which leaves our party well-positioned to tackle its last job before leaving town: murdering the Iron Collar Company. It's not an act that's going to further the mission of the Red Wizards in Icewind Dale, exactly. But bitterness is practically a national Thayan trait, and what better way to celebrate it than with petty revenge?

"By the hells," mutters Black Geoffrey as red-robed figures file into the pub. "What brings you crawling back this time?" He feels the strength sap from his body as Ichadad Bod utters the incantation for a Ray of Enfeeblement. And from then on, no more words are spoken, as the Iron Collar Company funnels its remaining energy into survival. It's not enough.

Gutherwulfe Henghelm, a river trader at the next table who drinks boar blood with milk, cheers us on. After Geoffrey falls, the innkeep demands we settle his tab. But Gutherwulfe buys us a pitcher, and soon enough, we've won the amulet he wears around his neck in a drinking game. It's the perfect cap to a great night of wizardry. Not only can Gutherwulfe's charm summon a slaving wolf into battle, but it does so by tapping into the shamanic magic of Rashemen – the rival magocracy next door to Thay.

In other words, it's weaponised irony. If there's anything the Thayans like more than winning a battle, it's winning a battle in a way that'll piss off their neighbours. ■





WHY I LOVE

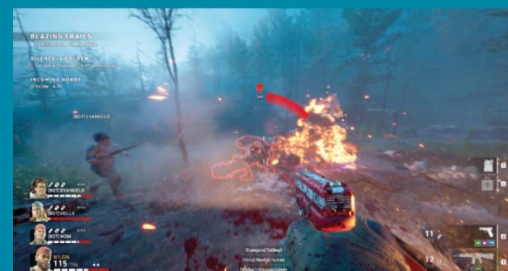
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

SHOOTING FROM THE HIP

Celebrating the modern shooters that make aim-down-sights optional. *By Morgan Park*



RIGHT: *Back 4 Blood* players can use attachments to make hipfire viable.



There is no better bliss in an FPS than the perfect hipfire kill. Sometimes, we hipfire because it's faster or because it's accurate, and sometimes we just want to best our foes with a bit of style. There's an implied flex to the hipfire that I absolutely love – as if you're such a good shot that you don't need to plant your feet on waist-high cover and look down a scope to pop headshots. What a power move!

The FPS was founded on hipfire. Some of the best shooters ever made are fun, in part, because of the hipfire. And yet, the last 20 years of videogames has seen this empowering ability nerfed into the ground. Most modern games favour the ADS (aim-down-sights) mechanic as a requirement to be accurate. There's lots of fun to be had with that kind of game as well, but the 'right mouse aim/left mouse shoot' standard slowed shooters down and relegated hipfire to an inaccurate secondary fire. Thankfully, the hipfire is back on the rise in recent years with excellent FPS throwbacks and modern takes that marry the two aiming styles together.

Hipfire has been on my mind a lot lately as I play through *Back 4 Blood*, Turtle Rock Studios' spiritual successor to *Left 4 Dead*. Now nine years removed from *Left 4 Dead 2*, I still consider it some of the purest FPS fun you can have with friends due in no small part to its hipfire-heavy gunplay.

I was afraid *Back 4 Blood* would lose some of this magic when I learned it'd feature modern FPS mechanics like sprinting and ADS. Now 15 hours into the game, I think my prediction was true, but hipfire is far from dead in *Back 4 Blood*.

On the contrary, hipfire is a reliable strategy at mid-to-close range that becomes even more powerful if you spec into that direction using the

ZOOM IN

The military shooters that popularized ADS



DELTA FORCE 1998

While the *Delta Force* doesn't have what we'd call ADS in 2021, it does have an on-screen scope.



OPERATION FLASHPOINT: CWC 2001

One of the earliest shooters with a genuine iron sight view for its guns.



DELTA FORCE: BLACK HAWK DOWN 2003

A military shooter that captured a multiplayer audience.



VIETCONG 2003

Released after *Black Hawk Down*, *Vietcong* demanded players to use its ADS view in order to be accurate.



CALL OF DUTY 2003

2003 was a big year for shooters. *Call of Duty* broke the ADS shooter out of the tactical realm.



CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE 2007

Modern Warfare's popularity set the tone of FPSes for the proceeding years.

game's card-based upgrade system. One of the playable characters, for example gains an accuracy buff every time he scores a headshot, and there are several cards that disable ADS in favour of increased hipfire accuracy. I've grown to love the system for encouraging a wide variety of

HIPFIRE HAS BEEN ON MY MIND A LOT LATELY AS I PLAY THROUGH BACK 4 BLOOD

playstyles in a way *Left 4 Dead's* simplicity can't support.

NEW CLASS

No game better embodies the throwback, hipfire-heavy FPS than id's modern *Doom* series. Both *Doom 2016* and *Doom Eternal* are the anti-*Call of Duty*, demanding that players stay on the move constantly to stay alive.

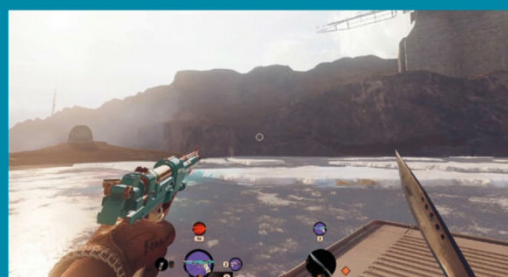
There is zero friction between Doomguy and his ability to shoot – that means no ADS option on most guns and no reloading. By default, Doomguy is perfectly accurate while moving at full speed and it's sensational to play. The game's combat would simply fall apart if it were any slower, so it's no wonder that recent shooters like *Necromunda: Hired Gun* have tried to capture the same hipfire-heavy action.

As good as it is, *Doom* is still somewhat of an anomaly. The majority of shooters out there that have a hipfire worth a damn also let you ADS in one way or another. An interesting newer example is *Halo Infinite*. *Infinite's* guns are 100% accurate from the hip, but similar to *Halo 5*, every gun also has an ADS option that's deactivated if you're shot while using it. After playing both multiplayer betas held so far, I'm liking the compromise.

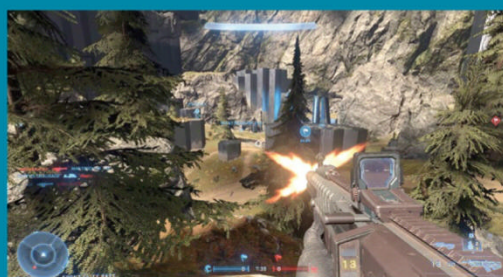
Then there's *Valorant*, a competitive FPS that feels like golf with guns – stop, plant your feet, aim, and then shoot. Hipfire kills in *Valorant* can feel divine when you've perfectly accounted for your gun's recoil pattern or nailed a life-affirming headshot. Hipfire is the default shooting mode for most firefights, but most guns also have an ADS option that alters how it shoots.

Sometimes, games opt for hipfire for the sake of simplicity. I love *Overwatch* for its deep roster of playstyles that mostly reserve right-click for cool abilities instead of ADS. Or *Deathloop*, a stealthy first-person shooter that not only encourages hipfiring its guns, but lets you dual wield one-handed weapons at the cost of ADS.

After years of studios chasing a single *Call of Duty*-shaped trend, it feels like there is no single blueprint for shooters anymore. Games can favour the hip or the scope and still find an audience for both. It's just more evidence that we're living in a golden age of shooters. ■



RIGHT: Worry not, hipfire is still king in *Halo Infinite*.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



PORTAL

The cake is... far more sinister than you remember. *By Ruth Cassidy*

Portal has a place in gaming canon that makes it difficult to argue why you should replay it. Either you've played it, and love it, or you know what it's all about. It's like pitching somebody on watching the original Star Wars trilogy for the first time: we all know who Luke's father is. Its iconic moments are part of games culture – the companion cube is almost passé as a symbol of nerd culture, not quite old enough to be retro but old enough to be out of date – and 'the cake is a lie' was more thoroughly memed than 'taking an arrow to the knee' was for *Skylrim*. And in the meantime, plenty of other games have built on *Portal*'s 'thinking with portals' mechanics, from puzzlers like *Bridge Constructor* to shooters such as *Splitgate*.

That's before mentioning *Portal 2*, too, which expands significantly on what the original *Portal* introduces. About four times as long with additional puzzle mechanics and a co-op campaign, *Portal 2* both gives us backstory on Aperture Science and GlaDOS, and introduces the highly quotable new characters of Wheatley and Cave Johnson. Johnson's speech about how 'when life gives you lemons, don't make lemonade, make life take the lemons back' may not have surpassed 'the cake is a lie', but it's printed on many, many tea-towels.

Why, then, play *Portal* now if its mechanics have been built on by newer games, and its most famous lines have been strip-mined for hilarity and printed on gamer t-shirts for years? Because, I argue, what *Portal*'s position in games canon belies is its effectiveness not as a

puzzler, or a comedy, but in telling a horror story about powerlessness.

TEST DRIVE

Portal constantly plays with control – and how much or little of it you have at any one time. As the game begins, you wake up in a small glass case which has no exit. All you can do is pick things up in your surroundings: a radio, a clipboard, a mug you can smash. (Which of course, I always do. Resistance may be futile, but I feel it is necessary.) All the while, a camera is watching you – from outside your glass case prison – and a timer is ticking down, while a robotic voice welcomes you to the facility, explaining that "your specimen has been processed" and testing may now begin.

It's easy to forget, but the first tests don't even let you use the portal gun, instead forcing you to navigate around pre-set portals. Even when you do eventually gain full control of both the blue and orange portals, and



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 10, 2007

DEVELOPER
Valve

PUBLISHER
In-house

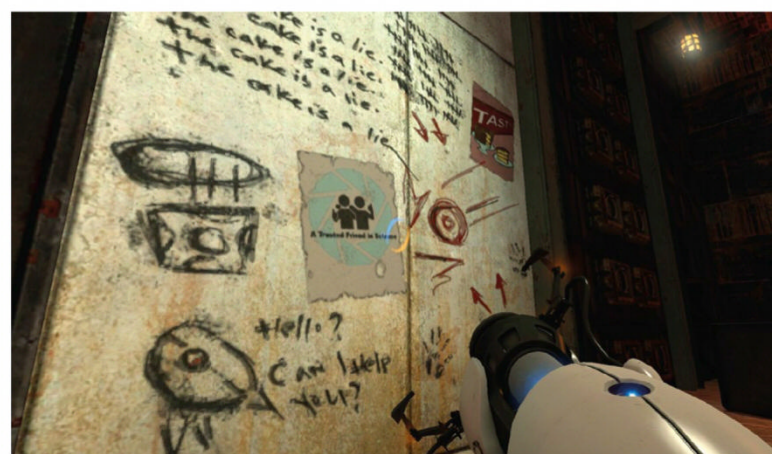
LINK
bit.ly/3DGTBRz



LEFT: You only ever get to see Chell through portals like this one.

ABOVE: If you know, you know.

RIGHT: The first of the refuges behind the walls.



it feels like the levels should have opened up to you, the level design still feels cold and hostile. You have to wait for platforms to come to you, for timers to align, for energy pellets to traverse to their destination. Of course it's possible to play it fast – there are both speedruns for 'fastest times' and 'fewest portals' – but there are only set ways you can act on the world. You can press buttons, and you can shoot portals. Trying to rush parts of the test prematurely will at best fail, and at worst get you killed.

The sense of only being a cog in a machine is oppressive – and while the messages are a little off, GlaDOS' presence early on is implied to be that of a set of pre-recorded messages, simply representing Aperture Science. She's the robot you talk to on the telephone while trying to find a real agent, if that robot had the capacity to snipe at you as much as you might want to snipe at it. You're functionally alone.

Increasingly, it's not only the design of the tests that are hostile

EVEN THE INTERSTITIAL SPACES BETWEEN LEVELS ARE HOSTILE

– in an interior design sort of sense – but the tests themselves. The floor in one will kill you, so you're warned to try to avoid it. Coming into contact with energy pellets, which ping off at regular intervals, will also kill you. Turrets, armed with laser-sights, will certainly kill you – or at least leave blood spattered up the pristine white walls while you work out how to disarm them. All the while, GlaDOS offers unhelpful advice, but promises the reward of cake at the other end. Cake, and in one instance, grief counselling.

Even the interstitial spaces between levels are hostile, with the emancipation grills that dissolve any items you try to bring with you (and may emancipate your fillings, crowns, tooth enamel, or teeth), but also the lifts, which are notably lined with padded walls. Invoking psychiatric wards isn't my favourite visual shorthand in horror, particularly when some of the canon background lore for Aperture is clumsy in its

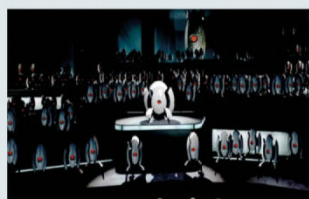
END CREDITS

The voice of GlaDOS after Portal



LEFT 4 DEAD

After *Portal*, Ellen McLain took on the much more laconic but equally unsettling role of the witch in *Left 4 Dead*. The zombie is readily identified by her cries, and her ability to rip you to shreds when startled.



TURRET OPERA

McLain is also trained as an opera singer, and performed the aria sung at the end of *Portal 2*. While the music was composed by Valve composer Mike Morasky, McLain improvised the Italian lyrics.

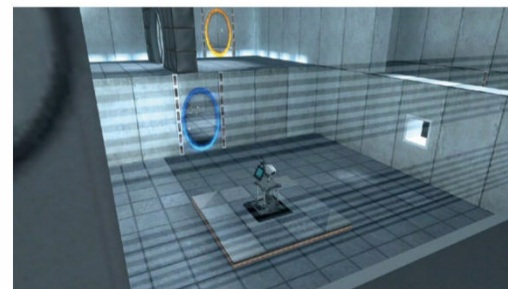


THE CHURCH IN THE DARKNESS

This sees McLain working alongside her husband and fellow actor, John Patrick Lowrie. The couple have also starred in multiple Valve games together – although not *Portal*.

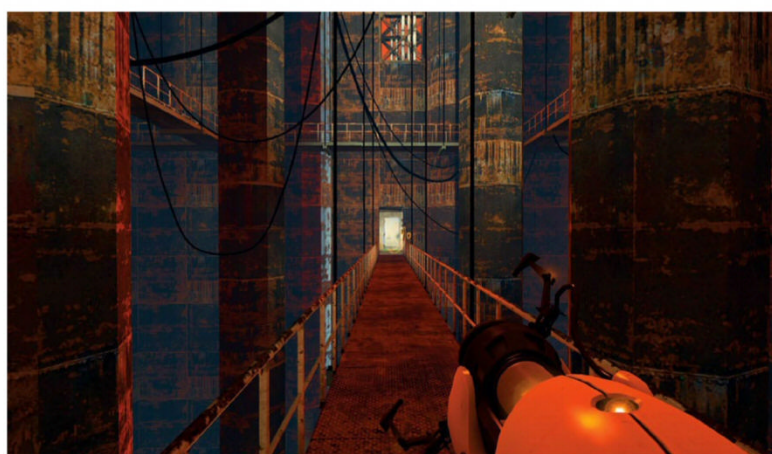


This test chamber has risks of drowning, head injury, recursive loops...



LEFT: The maintenance areas of Aperture look starkly different.

ABOVE: Arguably, there was cake.



» depiction of mental illness. Regardless, the imagery is known across too much media to not understand the effect: it's medicalised, and it's isolating.

CAKE BOSS

But of course, you aren't entirely isolated, because there's someone living inside the walls, behind the test chambers. In contrast to the sterile, surveilled test chambers, the maintenance areas as you discover them are rusting orange and falling

apart – not to mention covered in panicked graffiti. 'The cake is a lie', yes, but also plainly 'help', and if you hadn't picked it up from all the cameras – and GLaDOS's vocal dislike of having them destroyed – 'she's watching you'.

It isn't to suggest that whoever is behind the walls is themselves, scary or threatening – but the implications of why they have to be there. What's going to be at the end of testing? If there was going to be a way out of this, why is someone hiding from

'her'? Exactly how malevolent is Aperture, and what are you supposed to do about it? Every handprint staining the wall, every scrawled 'help', is a disruption from the controlled environment of the testing chambers, and a reminder that indefinite testing isn't normal or sustainable.

We remember GLaDOS as funny and mean, but she exists in *Portal* as a spectre of control. Many of her most absurd quotes ("That thing you burned up isn't important to me... It made shoes for orphans") are only when she's desperately trying to regain it. Until then, she has the upper hand in every situation, and her lines speak of the chilling distance of someone with complete power over your life, but also very little interest in it. "This next test could take a very, very long time. If you become light headed from thirst, feel free to pass out." They wouldn't land the same without the context that also makes them sinister. It's why, out of context, so many of the well quoted parts of *Portal* only feel like part of tiresome hashtag-random internet culture.

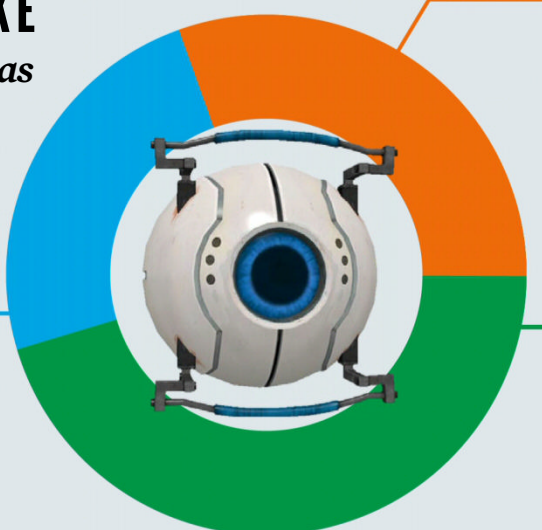
While GLaDOS' jabs become gradually meaner from her telephone-tree persona at the start

TRUTH CAKE

A cake recipe, as devised by GLaDOS's intelligence core

24%
DESIRABLE IN A CAKE

Ten ingredients out of 42
Ingredients include "one cup semi-sweet chocolate chips" and "four large eggs".



31%
TECHNICALLY
EDIBLE

13 ingredients out of 42
Ingredients include "Fish shaped crackers" and "one tablespoon rhubarb".

45%
HARMFUL TO
HUMANS

19 ingredients out of 42
Ingredients include "Fish shaped ethyl benzene" and "needle gun"



of the game, the progression from ‘this is an institution who doesn’t care about me’ to ‘this is a specific AI who personally hates me’ is marked. The shift from ‘we, Aperture’, to ‘I, GLaDOS’ only comes when GLaDOS drops the conceit and her narration becomes entirely unhinged. Even then, as much as she insists on party and cake, there are still some chilling lines as you move beyond the purview of her all-seeing cameras. “I know you’re there, I can feel you here.”

The testing, the surveillance, and the battle for control don’t only build to a sense of general dread, but one of institutional horror. Aperture could be a hospital, or a prison, and the trappings would barely change. But in them, Chell is an initially powerless individual, subject to the whims of someone with the authority to say “the difference between us is that I feel pain”.

The atmosphere that *Portal* builds, and the shift in weight between its first and second parts, wouldn’t work without how well the puzzles are designed, either. Each testing chamber gradually teaches you how to intuit various skills. When you might need to use conservation of momentum to fling yourself to a

BUT IT’S AS FUNNY AS IT IS BECAUSE IT GOES TO SUCH DARK PLACES

great height or distance, or how to time portals to go around lethal obstacles, or even the simple training to look for light tiles.

When you find yourself outside of the testing chambers, you’re no longer being asked to test, and these abilities become survival skills. It’s still all puzzle design, of course, but without the visual cues of test chambers – the step markers, the clearly marked entrances and exits – you’re forced to think on your feet. If the first half of the game is hostile because the chambers feel designed against you, the rest of Aperture isn’t designed for you at all.

BOX ART

Portal is funny. GLaDOS is ridiculous, the jargon for ‘cube’ and ‘button’ is excessively over-the-top, and turrets say ‘ow’ when you knock them over. But it’s as funny as it is because it goes to such dark places. *Portal 2* sets this darkness aside for more gag-based comedy and a jilted-ex

dynamic with GLaDOS – which I can appreciate on its own merits – but it also cements the *Portal* series as one remembered for its comedy. In the years since its release, the details contributing to its atmosphere of oppressive discomfort are flattened.

In under three hours, *Portal* uses the time it has to not only teach you exactly how to play it, but also to notch up tension until the necessary moment where it breaks. It’s effective for horror and a punchline both, with no room for emotional fatigue. It’s worth reinstalling for that experience specifically: of a short, creepy game, that’s clever and not bloated, and plays with the fine line between sinister and absurd.

Before booting it up again for this piece, I’d last played *Portal* only two years ago. Judging by my screenshot library – and memories of who exactly I’ve bullied into playing it – I’ve played it every two to three years since it was new to me. The puzzles are burned in muscle memory by now, but the interval is just enough time for any inoculation I had against the creepiness to wear off. ‘The cake is a lie’ might be a well-worn joke, but the help painted onto the floor in the same area is unsettling every time. ■

PHIL SAVAGE



It is 3am. The city rests, bodies silent, snuggled and warm. You queue for the next match. It is 4am. A bird, distant, complaining. Next match. It is 5am.



GUILD WARS 2

guildwars2.com

→ Sorry *New World*, it's not you, it's me. Wait, no, it *is* you: everything about your design reminds me of why *Guild Wars 2* remains one of the most smartly constructed MMOs around. I'm currently losing hours as I attempt to craft a bow that shoots the spirits of dead tigers. Worth it.



DESTINY 2

bungie.net

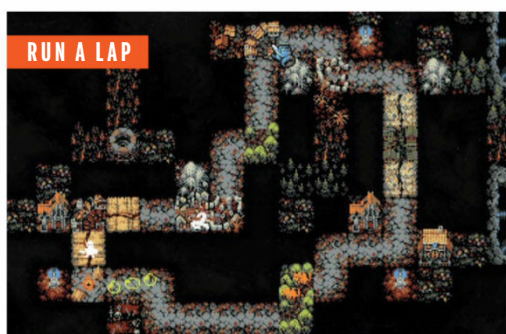
→ Is *Destiny 2* worth playing? That's too big a question for this space. Instead, here are some loose thoughts. 1) Live service games are always a compromise between developer and fanbase. 2) *Destiny 2* is better than it was last year. 3) It feels good to shoot the aliens.



YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

bit.ly/likeadragon

→ He may be good at fighting, but make no mistake: Ichiban has no chill. After years of *Yakuza* games being led by Kiryu, the series' new protagonist is just a dweeb. His brute force enthusiasm attracts other losers who engage in JRPG battles against Japan's criminal underworld.



LOOP HERO

bit.ly/herolooper

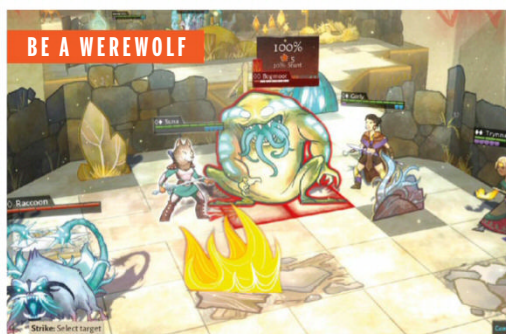
→ Travel a circular road, fighting the enemies that emerge from buildings that you yourself have placed. Each loop the enemies get stronger; each fight you gain loot that can help you get stronger too. Round and round you go, fighting and looting. Maybe, one day, you can stop.



APEX LEGENDS

ea.com/games/apex-legends

→ Eagle-eyed readers will note that this is the third live-service game in this collection. Is this an unwise use of my time? Yes. Have I missed out on most of the games released this year as a result? Yes. Should I cut back? Yes. Still: *Apex* has a good crouch slide, so I'm not going to stop.



WILDERMYTH

wildermyth.com

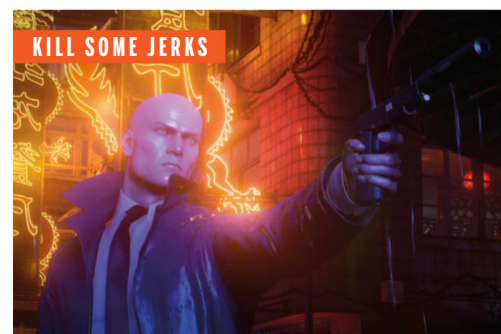
→ It's like if *XCOM* had a dungeon master – albeit one obsessed with transforming your party into a variety of animals and spirits. This focus does, however, bring new tactical options. Perhaps your ranger can't hold a bow because their hands are now wolf paws, for example.



DEATHLOOP

bit.ly/deathlooper

→ A sort of tribute to Arkane's legacy, where *Dishonored's* powers meet *Dark Messiah's* kick. *Deathloop* is also the progression of everything the studio has learned about stealth gaming, where a mistake can't be quicksaved away and failure resets each time you wake up.



HITMAN 3

hitman.com

→ If you've not dabbled with IO's most recent *Hitman* trilogy, you're in for a treat. Through DLC, you can house the full thing inside of *Hitman 3*, transforming it from a very good stealth game into what might be the largest one ever made. There is enough here to last you for years.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

Gone on 3,600 speed dates



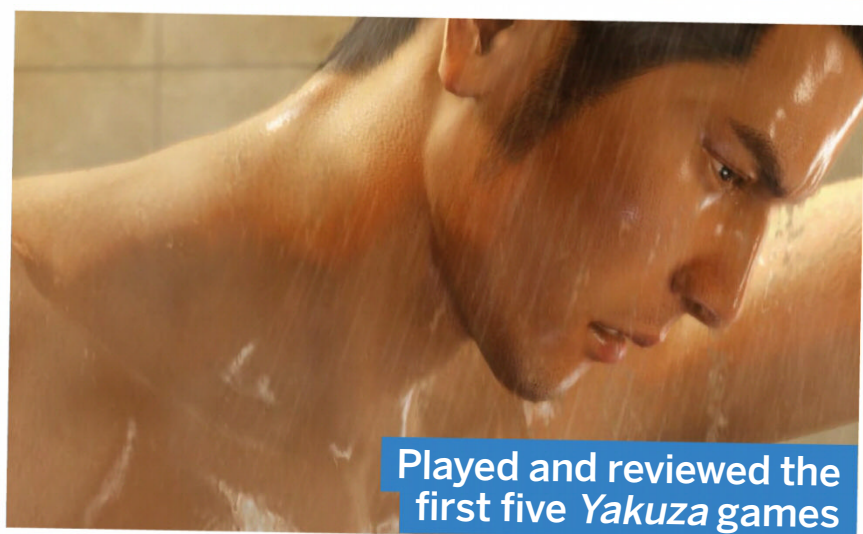
Watched a decade of David Attenborough documentaries



Reconnected with everyone he went to school with



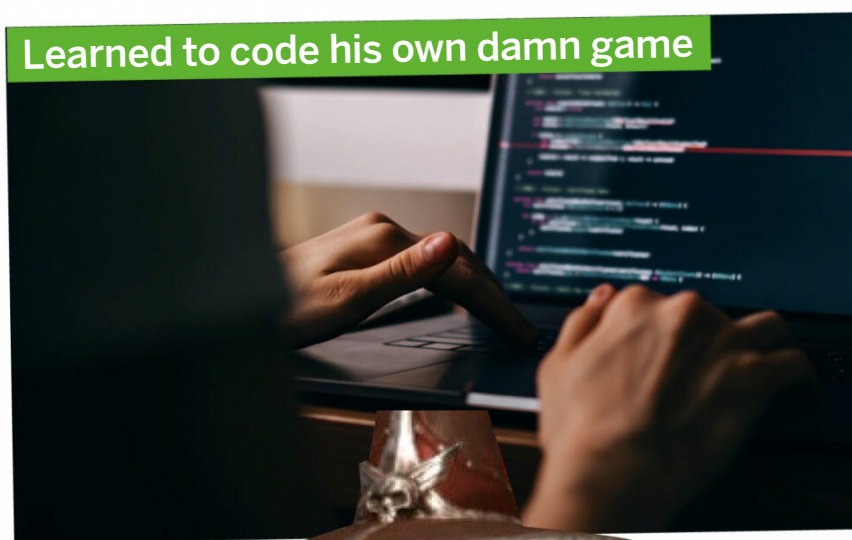
Played and reviewed the first five *Yakuza* games



Walked to Devon and back



Learned to code his own damn game



AROUND THE WORLD

Our intrepid reviewer Fraser Brown spent about 300 hours in *New World*, only to give it a 60% score. What else could he have accomplished in that time instead?

...UNTIL **DEC 09**



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